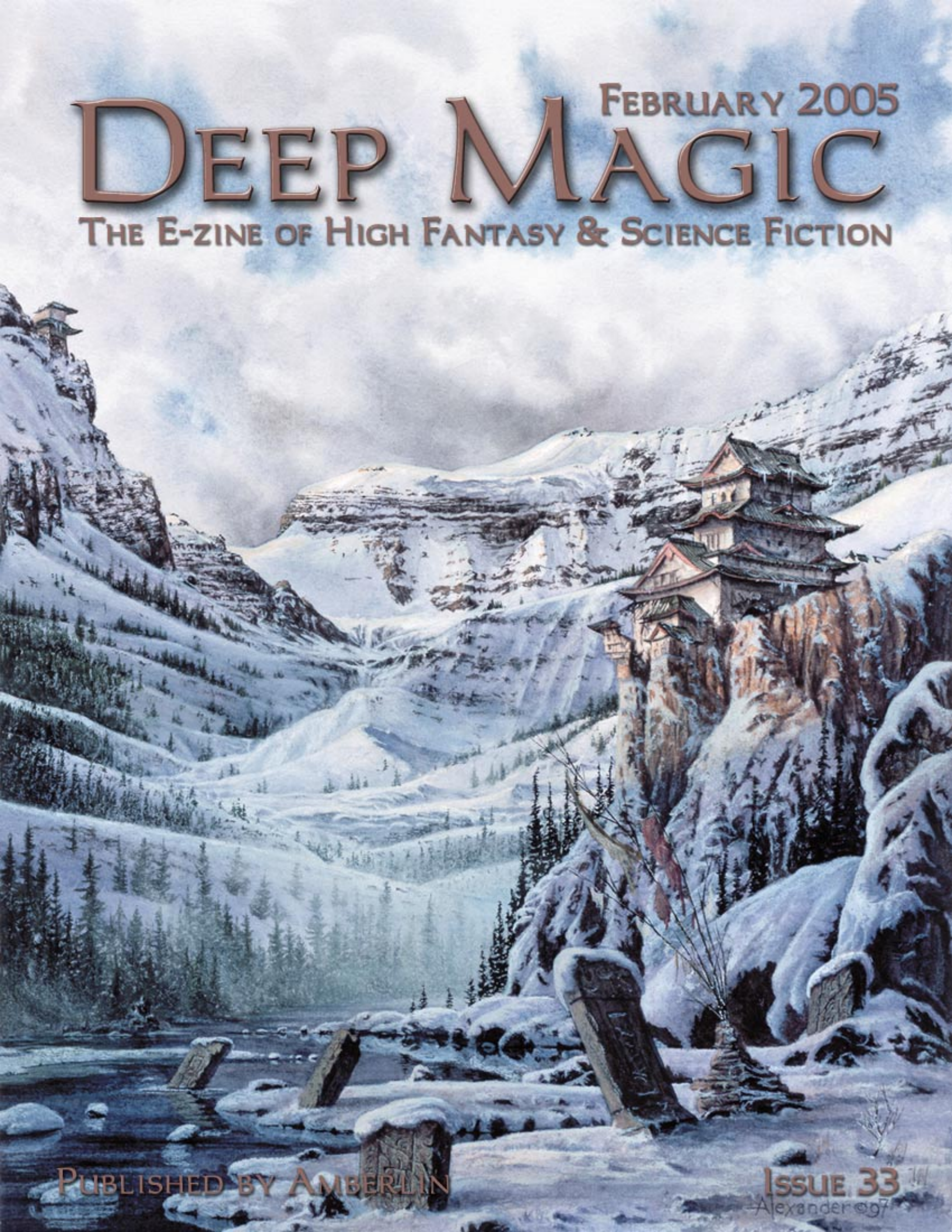
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L. D. Reece
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Website: http://www.deep-magic.net

Feedback: http://www.deep-magic.net/contact

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"*Honors Vale*"

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We would like to send a regretful good-bye to Usman Tanveer Malik, who has left the Deep Magic staff this past month. An increased workload in Med School prompted his departure. We will miss him greatly and wish him the best of luck.

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A subscription to Deep Magic is absolutely free. Each month, we will notify you when a new issue is released. You will also be notified periodically when Deep Magic has special news or offers. Go to the website and subscribe today.

If you are familiar with the internet at all, you know how common dead and broken links are. If you ever try to access a link from this e-zine and it no longer works, don't give up. Go to http://www.deep-magic.net where you will find archives of previous issues. As we catch dead and broken links, we will make a note on the corrections page for that issue. If that is the case, you will find the corrected URL there. If we have not already caught the defective link, please let us know, and we will do all we can to track down an updated URL for the information you seek. However, please keep in mind that sometimes content is taken down and is gone forever.

February 2005

Welcome to the month of romance (here in the United States, anyway). Mystery and adventure awaits you in this issue of Deep Magic. And a little romance, of course. With the new year well underway, we at Deep Magic have been looking to the future of the e-zine, and over the next few months we hope to bring some changes around here. Don't worry, though, Deep Magic will still be available as a free dowload. Our first step is to make an open call for a couple more staff members. Go to the next page for the scoop. Stay tuned for more details, and read Jeremy's 'State of the E-zine' article in this month's issue for some more info.

This month's cover article is brought to you by Rob Alexander. Some additional pieces of art and an interview with Rob are included inside. Also included this month is a fantastic article by reknown fantasy author Mike Stackpole, who gave us permission to reprint one of his writing craft articles from his Rules of Writing series. We hope to bring you more of his articles in the future. This one is a must-read for any aspiring author.

M. Thomas is back this month with another story about the barbarians of Boeotia from the world of Kenatos in *Becoming Empire*. Robert Shell brings *Imoen's Arrow*, a fantasy adventure story about one man's attempt to rescue his sister from a strange beast. Finally, Mark Reeder is back, this time teaming up with fellow author Ron Meyer, with a mystery from *The Other Side*.

Lest we forget the romance, don't miss the writing challenge submissions we published. There is plenty of love in these stories to go around.

Thank you for reading the e-zine, now on to this month's issue of Deep Magic...

Regard's,
The Editors

Safe Places for Minds to Wander

Volunteer Positions Available

From time to time, we lose staff members here at Deep Magic. We also want to make every effort to keep the work to a minimum for existing staff members. We have decided to open up a couple positions at Deep Magic, and we want to make an open call to all our readers. Below are the positions we have available and a brief description of them. At the end you will find instructions for volunteering.

Book Reviews: We are looking for one or two people to do fantasy and/or science fiction reviews for Deep Magic. Book reviewers work closely with Matt Winslow to provide regular reviews following our Deep Magic standard. If you are interested, please follow the instructions below and provide a sample book review.

Artwork: We are looking for one person to find new artwork for Deep Magic. This would consist of searching websites and identifying possible cover artists and artists who can be featured inside the e-zine. Contacting the artists won't be necessary, and final decisions will rest with us, but we need to help find artists. Some kind of art or design background is a plus, but not necessary. Look at our back issues to see the type of art we have done in the past.

Copyeditor: We have a number of staff members who copyedit stories and articles, but we are looking to take on an additional copyeditor. If you are interested, and you have skills and an editing background, follow the contact instructions below.

Note: All staff members, regardless of their role, are invited and encouraged to read Deep Magic submissions and offer feedback on which stories should be included in the e-zine. Staff members are allowed to submit their own stories.

To apply for one of the positions above, please go to our contact form and select Volunteer Information from the pull-down menu. If you are interested in reviewing books, please include a sample review as well.

Writing Challenge

Each month, Deep Magic offers an opportunity and a challenge for our readers who are also writers. These challenges are designed to help you develop your writing talents. Whether you are a novice who has never written a fictional paragraph, or a veteran of the publishing business, you are welcome to participate. As incentive, or by way of warning, we select a small number of submissions each month for publication.

To submit a challenge, go to our new online submissions system. You will need to create an author profile and account. **We have a new due date for Writing Challenge submissions!** They will be printed one month later, and you have longer to submit them. Please note the deadline date below.

February 2005 Writing Challenge
Entries due March 10, 2005

Senses are powerful tools we use to experience the world. They are touch, taste, smell, hearing, and sight (though one can argue that seeing the dead is a sense by itself). The senses often conjure strong memories. While writers rely on many sensory crutches to develop stories, this month's challenge is to use one of the lesser-used senses in a scene: the sense of taste or smell. Write a scene that uses the sense of taste or smell (or both) and the memories they conjure for a character in the scene. Please limit your challenge submission to 1000 words or less.

Selections from the December 2004 Writing Challenge

Do Not Stir
Lady Galiena
Naupaka
The Gift of Magic
Under the Ypil-Ypil Tree

The above stories were selected from the December challenge, which was to tell us the story of how two characters came together to form a relationship that changed the very stars above them, told from the point of view of one of the characters involved.

Don't forget the January challenge due Feb 10:

Though primarily a Fantasy e-zine, Deep Magic also tries to include quality Science Fiction as often as possible. With that in mind, the challenge this month is simple: create a scene from a Science Fiction story. Of course, it won't be as simple as that. Since much of what makes the genre unique is the technology that drives it (warp speed, lightsabers, etc.), you must create your own unique technology, or create your own twist on a technology we're all familiar with.

The scene can be a stand-alone, or it can be part of a larger story. However, keep it to within 1000 words.

Do Not Stir or Awaken Love Until it So Desires

By Trevor Ryan Mountney

The moon shed its light across the night sky. I dangled my legs off the cliff. It was after the feast, and all the other boys went off to mingle with the girls. I didn't follow them on their hopeless quest. I was different. The way girls invaded my thoughts frightened me. They could control me and cause my brain to shrivel up and die. I had made the decision to stay away from them earlier that night. But it did not last. You were irresistible.

You didn't go with the others that night, either. Instead, you followed me. I was startled when you sat beside me. Silence dominated the air between us, which lessened as you drew nearer.

"An' what you doin' this night by yourself? You must be chilled," you said.

"I ain't like going with the others. Girls are dangerous. I don't like em."

"That mean you don't like me?"

"Not you yourself, but the way I be around you."

You snuggled on my shoulder, "Why tis it be a bad thing?"

I don't know exactly what happened, but I cuddled you. And you kissed me.

That was the night I fell in love with you. Our love grew. There was only one thing slowing us down. Your father.

I was waiting for you by the edge of your field, in the trees. The night was cold, and I wanted to share your warmth. Instead of you, a bulky figure greeted me, followed by the hissing of a blade. A sabre pressed against my throat.

"Keep away from me daughter. If I ever see you with her again, you a dead boy."

I don't know why, but I stayed there anyway. After your father left, of course. But you never did come. He probably had you locked away.

The next night we met by my place. A warmth was in the night air, making being outside comfortable. I saw you coming from a distance and ran up to meet you. When I put my face to yours to kiss you, you turned you head away. A move of rejection.

"No, we mustn't. My father forbids us," you said.

"Your father cannot control love. Tomorrow we will run away. Love will guide us."

"I must go. Father must not become suspicious."

"Tomorrow, at the same time," I said.

You then left. Leaving all our hopes and our future to tomorrow. But it was not to be.

In the afternoon, the next day, I went to town to buy some bread for our journey. There were none wandering the streets. Everyone was gathered at the well. One of the townsmen was making an announcement.

"I have some very sad news,' the townsman said, "Islia Ciale is dead. She was killed by a drunken man walking home last night."

I was shocked. This could not be! Fate was so cruel. You died before we even had our future together! I had run away into the forest crying. As I cry now.

The evening light dimmed as a slow breeze swept across the graveyard. An old man wept over a crude grave covered with flowers. The old man came there every day, retelling his story every time. The only one that listened was the great oak two graves away, and perhaps the spirit of the one who will have that man's love forever.

Lady Galiena – The Watcher of the Road

By C. Lynn Czerniawski

She plucked a white gown from her dresser and hoped the gods would bless her. After a promise to wed, her beloved Hans had said, "Meet me in the wooded glen by the path where our new life will begin. We shall leave this crumbling village behind and seek all the happiness we can find." Tendrils of auburn bounced down with grace as she let them fall to frame her face. Her heart skipped at the thought of her father's wrath, for he disapproved of this marriage crassly made. Wrapping a flowered shawl about her shoulders, Galiena slipped out the window and headed toward the woods all aglow. A full moon lit the fragrant spring night, shining with the luminosity of fairy wings in flight. How she would miss frolicking with the fairy folk who befriended but never spoke.

Galiena avoided the main roads, dreading her father's discovery. Her father was a man to fear, with a hatred for what she held dear. His was an evil so profound he crushed all her dreams into the ground. What she made with love and kindness, he destroyed in rage's blindness. He knew of the couple's intention and kept Hans from his destination.

Under a rising moon, her blue eyes gleamed like a hyacinth's bloom as the fairy princess guided her friend to meet her groom. Once they arrived at the path leading from town, Galiena leaned against a tree in her wedding gown. "Oh, Leona, I hath waited for this day since I was a girl. In Hans' loving arms I shall soon curl." Leona's voice deafened mortals so words were not verbalized, but the young maiden saw reassurance in the fairy's eyes.

Her lover's foot-falls were never heard, only the sound of a hooting bird. A sullen song played on rustling leaves in a suspiring breeze. The warmth of flowering love was replaced by the cold of a lover scorned; her tears were a waterfall of sorrow whose death was but a dew drop in the morn. With each passing moment, her heart fractured like falling pottery from a lofty perch. Inside her grew a curse as seeds of bereavement gave birth. Creatures of the mist gathered with Galiena to cry, who lay on the unforgiving ground nearby. When her deprived heart could bear no more pain, she called to the one whose trust she could gain.

"Harbinger of Death, I beg of thee, take this life that was given to me. My lover hath shattered my soul and left me in this world so cold. I cannot bear to continue on for I am abandoned and all alone. This is the task I ask of thee. Please find compassion for me." Death saw the truth within her eyes, as well as her father's thicket of lies. As she stared into the breaking morning's sky, he took pity and lowered his scythe. Her body twitched with the release of her final breath, and with it went forth thanks to the Harbinger of Death.

The fairy princess was saddened by Galiena's chosen demise; purplish-green flowers were the tears she cried. When fairy tears kissed the ground, little green sprouts grew all 'round. Reverently, Leona watched the buds grow and bloom; pale tiny flowers became Galiena's hair by noon. Death's regret gripped the day, keeping leery travelers at bay. Fair Lady Galiena was gone as the evening light dawned. By day's end, purplish-green flowers were all that remained; they haunt the roadside like the bereft maiden whose lover never came.

Naupaka

By Matthew Dunn

Today started off well. As usual, the thick misty fog surrounded me here on the ridge-top, but I still had many chances to see the coastline. A few finches, i'iwis and 'elepaios, played in my branches for a bit, school-children at recess, then flitted off towards the juicier o'hia blossoms down slope; the bees remain my constant companions. The sun, when the mist let him, warmed my leaves, cheering me up. Then the old man came again.

I sense he won't be coming much longer, but he yet brings me joy. His eyes have been growing smaller of late, his breathing labored and his back more bent, yet still he comes to visit me with his binoculars. His visits are longer; he speaks less. We search the coastline together, comfortable in silence, and he points her out to me when the mists permit.

Later, when the youngsters came and the old man told the story, the day grew melancholy. We heard them before they arrived, stomping through the uluhe and yelling at their dog. The old man put down his musubi, for he was having his lunch, and sighed when he heard them. His eyes stayed on the grainy image of beach through the mist when he spoke.

"They are young, naupaka. Forgive their intrusions and disrespect, and I will try the same. Maybe today we will teach others of your plight, yes? I cannot be the only company you keep much longer, and I have no sons who will come in my place. Yes, we will teach; let us hope they will learn."

I like the old man; he is a good friend.

Their dog came first. It seemed to like the old man, dancing on and around him like a bee in my blossoms, panting and licking at everything. It took his musubi. The youngsters ambled in after, stopping their loud talking when they saw us. Saw him.

"Old grandfather, how you today? Beautiful day, you go for top?" They spoke in pidgin, their skin brown and feet in slippers. The old man has told me of the haoles, the soulless ones with white skin, but few ever come this far up the ridge. These were kama'äina—people of the land. Locals. The old man waved the question off—he hadn't gone to the peak since his eyes started failing, though he never admitted as much.

"Sit, sit, and we'll talk story. I have more musubi, and I would drink of your water. The summit will remain should you return; though who knows if we will cross paths again," he said to them. The youngsters, a man and woman, smiled at him and sat. Their dog ran off after a moth. It would return.

They stayed long, and spoke of much. These two were much like the old man once was, and it pleased me to see a fresh light sparking his eyes. He told them many stories, and they chatted about the plight of their people. They had passion in their words; that was good. Later, once the food was done, the woman asked him, "Kü kü käne, why do you always sit here by the naupaka bush? Our friends have hiked this ridge many times, and said you are always here, staring at the coastline. What is it you wish to see?" The mist grew thicker, driving away the sun. The young man gave the woman his jacket; the old man did not have one to put on. Even the bees began to leave for sunnier spots. That was when my sad tale was told.

"Do you know the story of how the naupaka came to be," he asked them. They did not. "It is a tale of a young woman and a young man, much like yourselves. She was a beautiful

maiden, with milky skin and hair like bleached by the sun, like beach sand. Always were there boys giving her blossoms for her hair, and leis for her neck. Many even asked for her hand. She was kind to them all, but never did she accept, for there was one such man to whom her heart belonged. Daily she would watch him, her eyes heavy and her breath sharp. He labored every day in her father's taro fields, and his muscles told the tale of his efforts. His smile made his eyes shine purple in the warm sun, and it made her blush. Many times every day, when he was tending the fields, he would look to where she sat under a sandalwood tree looking back at him. Just as he had stolen her heart, she had his. When at last he gained the courage to speak to her, they fell immediately in love.

"From the start, their passion was wond'rous and powerful. It is said that when they first kissed, Maui, the strongest and most virile of the gods, was moved to create Kaua'i, just to try to match that infinite beauty. The sun himself paused to weep at the sight. This is how pure their love was."

The young couple shared an intimate look, and grasped each other's hands. Every couple he's told this story to in my presence has thought it a description of their very own love. Though I stretch my roots as far down the mountain as I can, still I cannot reach my other half. I can never take comfort or get reassurance from similarly entwining in her embrace. I do not like this story.

The old man continued, "Now, Pele, Great Goddess of Fire, she heard of this powerful and beautiful love that was like no other. She emerged from her land-making in Kilauea to see this couple. When she laid her eyes of fire on the man, she was so entranced that she wanted him for herself. She approached him in the form of a naked woman, her golden-brown skin soft as clouds and smelling like a fresh lei, by far the most beautiful woman to ever walk these islands. She attempted to woo him." The old man paused to share a scandalous look with the couple, then continued.

"Do not fear, for the man would not be swayed. He denied Pele, not knowing her true identity. Repeatedly, she tried to lure him away from his love, but always he remained steadfast. Now, Pele, being the jealous god that she is, refused to accept this. She became so enraged that she dropped the disguise and assumed her true form. The young couple saw her, and, knowing of her rage, fled. All over the island Pele chased them, hurling flaming lava. Somehow, in the commotion, the couple became separated. The man ran mauka, towards the mountains, while the young woman ran makai, towards the ocean. Pele chased the man up the mountain, and cornered him at the peak. Just as she was about to smite him down in her jealous rage, Pele's sisters intervened,

"Now, we all know that of that bunch, Pele is the jealous one, while her sisters are benevolent, gentle ladies. They took pity on the young lovers and could not bear to see Pele's jealousy get in the way of such a beautiful thing. Rather than see her destroy him, as Pele was about to kill the man, they turned him into the naupaka bush.

"Mad, Pele was. No doubt, she was livid. She turned and ran all the way down the mountain, across the island, to the sea. She found the young woman, and prepared to take revenge on her instead. Again the sisters intervened, and before Pele could hurt the young woman, they turned her also into a naupaka bush."

The woman now had her head resting on her man's shoulder, and both looked forlorn. They watched the old man intently as he spoke, and dared not move. I just wanted the tale finished so we could go back to watching the coastline. But still the old man spoke.

"Look at the naupaka, do you see how all the petals are only on one side of the flower?

This is naupaka kuahiwi, mountain naupaka. You see how the petals are purple, with yellow inside, just like the young man's eyes were? This is that young man. Forever he must remain here, separated from his true love. When next you go to the shoreline, look in the dunes at the naupaka kahakai, the beach naupaka. You will see her petals are white, her berries dark black. That is his love. Her petals are also only on one side of the flower. They are both only half-flowers. Like any couples truly in love, neither is whole without the other.

"One day, if ever they can be brought together, they will reunite and become whole once again."

The young man pulled his knees to his chin; the woman wept silently beside him. The old man took their canteen and drank his fill. Then he splashed some water on my trunk. I did not need it, but still, I appreciated his concern. That story does always exhaust me.

Though I no longer have eyes, somehow, I can still see Pele, her entire body aflame and screaming, racing behind me, all the while hurling liquid fire. Often I stumbled, tripping in the weedy uluhe or getting tangled in the viny maile. As that fiery goddess stalked me, all my thoughts were with my Leilani. To this day, my final words as a man ring in the air like a trapped echo, never fading. "Leilani, aloha wau iâ 'oe!"

The couple had gone, arms around each other's waists, leaving the old man and I to our sorrows. The dog returned just in time to leave, pausing only long enough to relieve himself on my trunk. I have endured worse. I do endure worse. The old man hefted his binoculars again, but he was growing tired.

"There," he said, "just mauka of that yellow sailboat." He turned to me, lowering his binoculars. "I wish you would let me bring her to you. Though I know she could never root here, at least you could be together temporarily. Maybe just a branch."

I like the old man; he is a good friend. He means well but does not understand. To see her temporarily would be but a vicious tease. When Pele reigns in her jealousy and her sisters see fit, my Leilani and I will be reunited. We will become whole once again.

Until then, I endure. The old man will leave soon, and one day he will not come back to help me look for her. I will miss him, but the young couple said they would like to come back. I would like that. Though, I hope next time they do not bring the dog.

Author's Note: *The story related in this Writing Challenge submission is a retelling of a traditional Hawaiian myth. If you are interested in learning more about naupaka, feel free to contact me on the Deep Magic Forums.*

The Gift of Magic

By Christina Schneider

"You can't remember, can you? You can't remember at all. Probably not. . . But I remember . . . Let me tell you."

* * *

Michael turned up the collar of his jacket against the wind and shoved his hands in his pockets. The icy breeze ruffled his brown hair, whirling dead leaves across his path. He shuddered.

"Something's odd..." Michael looked over his shoulder. "I can't quite put my finger on it..."

. . . miiiiichaaaaellll . . .

He stopped.

"Hm . . . Just the wind." Michael shrugged, looking into the sleeping forest by the road.

. . . miiiichaeeeel . . .

"H-hello?" He stepped off the road. "Is someone there?"

Whispers passed between the trees within the forest depths. Crunching between the gray leafless figures, Michael searched around the thickening forest.

"Hello?" Michael struggled through a patch of dense undergrowth and stumbled into a small clearing. Amidst the dying grass, an aged oak towered high, a forest unto itself of thick gnarled branches. But it was not the ancient tree that held Michael's attention, it was the woman dancing barefoot beneath it. Her black unbound hair swirled and flew with her movements. Her face was fair and pale as a lotus flower.

Leaves stirred by the wind whirled around her, shifting to follow her movements. The woman danced in a way Michael had never seen before. It wasn't a dance of choppy or swift movements, but a dance that flowed together in grace, like water.

Snap!

She stopped, staring at him.

Michael cleared his throat, walking into view.

"What are you doing here?" she demanded.

"I, uh. . . . thought I heard someone calling me. I'm sorry. I didn't mean to spy on you." Michael turned away.

"Wait,"

He stopped.

"What's your name?"

"Michael," He replied.

Suddenly, a chuckle sounded from the forest. They both looked up. A man in black leather stepped out of the trees.

"Mersc . . ." she breathed.

"Cryss, my love." He smiled. "I've come to take you away from this mortal's land." Mersc held out his hand

Cryss drew back. "I'm not going, Mersc. I'm staying here."

Mersc's smile fell into a dangerous frown. "I'm under order to bring you back, my love.

Whether you agree or not." From the folds of his cloak, he drew a sword.

"Whoa," Michael laughed nervously. "Don't you think this is a little bar—"

"Out of my way, mortal!" Mersc spat. He slapped the flat of his blade across Michael's face. Staggering back, Michael held the side of his cheek. He looked at his hand. There was blood on it.

"Hey, that thing's sharp!" Michael cried out in surprise.

Mersc turned on Cryss and swung the sword down at her. Cryss caught the blade between the palms of her hands.

"You're coming back with me, Cryss, my love."

"You're not the man I fell in love with anymore!" Cryss cried. "You've changed, Mersc!"

"A change that you drove!" smiled Mersc. "I finally have become stronger! Like you wanted me to."

"Mersc . . . The only thing I wanted was to be by you. To stand by your side."

Michael dashed forward and shoved Mersc back.

"C'mon. Knock it off!"

"You're really annoying me." Mersc approached, pointed his forefinger at Michael. "Kartocu!"

"Mersc, don't!" Cryss jumped in the way. Michael was pulled back a pace as a shockwave blew through the grass. Cryss staggered back and fell.

Mersc lowered his hand. He sheathed his sword and approached.

"C'mon! Just. . . Back off!!" Michael said, putting himself between Mersc and Cryss.

Mersc stopped. " I have what I came for anyway." He grinned and faded away.

"Cryss!" Michael dashed over.

She smiled up at him, the light in her eyes fading. "Why did you protect me? I don't even know you. . ."

"A-anyone would have done it," said Michael.

She broke into a fit of coughing.

"Cryss! What's wrong?!"

"Michael. . . I want you to take this. . ." She held up an empty palm. "Give me . . .your hand. . ."

"Okay." Michael felt something roll into his palm. A warm tingle began crawling up his arm.

" . . . keep it safe. . . for me . . . "

"Cryss? Cryss! Hey, hold on! Cryss!!!"

* * *

Michael finished his story.

Cryss sat in a hospital be; her eyes held no emotion or recognition.

Michael squeezed her hand.

"I thought you should know what happened . . .." Michael stood up suddenly. "I'm going to find Mersc and get your memory back. I'll come back for you. I promise."

Michael walked out onto the street. He opened his hand. A small shining orb floated in the center of his palm. People passed by, unable to see the magic in his hand. Shaking his head, he smiled. Michael tugged the collar of his coat against the wind, put his hands in his pocket, and melted away into the crowd.

Under the Ypil-Ypil Tree

By Anne M. Stickel

Unaware of how I came to be there, I dragged the tiny bandaged woman from the ruins of the high-rise public hospital. She was surprisingly unhurt. After I carried her to Rizal Park near the former site of the elegant Manila Hotel, she finally spoke. Among our small group of survivors, all save two university students able to understand English left us to ourselves.

"I wish I could see you to thank you," she said. "And I wish I could recall more about myself. I can't believe I've even forgotten my name and my village. But I do know that the doctors were treating my eyes for Lomi-Lomi worm disease. That's why my head is bandaged. Where are we?"

"You don't need to thank me, Miss," I replied, squeezing her hand to reassure her. "Call me 'GK'. We're in Rizal Park in Manila. If there's anything you need, I'll help you as far as I'm able. I think English isn't your first language, since you speak with an accent."

"Your voice sounds familiar, GK. Now I remember something else. I had two little boys when I came to Manila on a bus. We three were very hungry. Their father had abandoned us, I think. I pushed a buggy with the baby until I grew tired. He cried so much that I took him out of the buggy and left him on the front porch of a shelter. I told his older brother to stay with him. Then I put the buggy in a big garbage bin. The pain from my infection made me do such strange things… What brought you to Manila?"

"I was on my way to Mount Pinatubo to find one I left behind. We met when I was on an agricultural mission to her village. The village apos never recognized our right to be together, even though I helped put in water pipes and plant an orchard of ypil-ypil trees. I also taught English to the children and anyone else who wanted to learn. We had a small son and another baby on the way when I received word that my father was dying. I had to leave. There was no time to arrange her papers." At this, the university students, a young couple, smiled shyly at each other, but the girl had tears in her eyes.

"You should tell her what happened to Pinatubo," said the girl.

"We are here now because of Pinatubo," I told the bandaged woman. "There was an eruption and an earthquake. Manila is destroyed." I felt her hand tremble in mine, and then her whole body spasm in the grip of grief.

"My oldest boy was willful, and chased after me," she said between sobs, "begging me to turn back because I had forgotten his baby brother. When he stopped to watch other boys flying their kites in Rizal Park I hurried away, leaving him like his father had left me. The hospital gave me cleaning work so that I could pay for treatment. But every night I dreamed I was riding a giant kite over the park, looking down, searching for my two boys…"

Her guilty admission was interrupted. The ground shook as if to remind us that our situation was far from secure. The two students, who would have been thrown to the ground if they weren't already sitting, held each other. I tried to put my arms around all of them. Ash rained down on Rizal Park.

The other people in Rizal Park began to scream and cry. The ash was a sign that the force dome which protected the crumbled city was failing.

I looked wildly around, trying not to let the panic I felt show in my voice, "We need to get

to high ground." I nodded to the students, expecting them to know where to head.

The boy spoke up, "If we can find Papa's boat, we might have a chance."

The girl ran to the other survivors, her voice urgent in Tagalog, Illocano, and another dialect I didn't recognize. I picked up my tiny bandaged charge and followed the two students. The rest straggled along behind us. We found and righted an air jitney, piling on till even the roof and hood were covered.

"I can smell the sea," said the bandaged woman. The student driving our jitney, his dark brows knit in concentration, began to sweat. At the thought of the quake-stirred sea battering at the weakened force dome, so did I.

Arriving at Manila Bay harbor at last, we tumbled from the jitney. Along the entire route we had seen neither a sign of life nor heard a sound from those buried in the stinking rubble.

The students ran down the docks until they reached the smaller craft, whereupon the lad produced a key as he leapt aboard a tidy fishing boat, *Doña Hernandez* painted on her side. The Hernandez family had money.

On the other side of the force dome we noticed the higher level of the water pressing against it. Everyone clambered aboard as best they could. No sooner were we boarded and the magnetic anchor released, than the force of the elements overcame the manmade protection surrounding Manila, lifting us on a huge surge of water.

The bandaged woman tore away the imprisoning gauze as a shudder went through the groaning vessel. She squinted up into my eyes and gasped, "Don't you know me, George? I'm your Maria!" She hugged my neck and kissed me.

Then I did know her. And, for a moment, it was not the monstrous sea I saw, nor the ghosts of my lost sons, but my beloved wife lying in my arms under the ypil-ypil tree. I smelled not the damp rot of death, but the perfume of ypil-ypil blossoms.

Becoming Empire

By M. Thomas

Year 6 B.F.

The Empress was putting her Generals through a rigorous assessment. I could hear her dagger's tip thunking into the wooden table-top, on which was painted an exquisite map of the known world. The door to the library was wood but not so thick it could not be listened through.

"What is this?" *Thunk.*

"Boeotia, Divine," the generals replied.

"And this?" *Thunk.*

"Boeotia, Exquisite," they said.

"And this?" *Thunk.*

There was a moment of uneasy silence. Ziri's sleeve whispered against mine. She had her hand over her mouth to prevent giggles escaping. We'd sneaked up from the kitchen and kept an eye out for cook as we eavesdropped.

"They…they *call* that Kenatos, Light of the World," one of the generals ventured.

Ziri and I sighed, and shook our heads in unison.

"Oh, Gerlund," the Empress said, her voice soppy with disappointment. "There is so much you do not understand."

I turned to Ziri and drew myself up in the way of the Empress. I mummed her words as she spoke them, pointing with my right finger.

Then there is the Boeotia Within. That is the Boeotia without borders. The one that slips into households and castles with the grains of sand caught in the heels of men's boots.

"There are two Boeotias," she said (I mouthed). "The Boeotia Without, and the Boeotia Within. Boeotia Without is the one we have marked here." *Thunk.* Then we heard *scree-scree-scritch* as she drew her dagger's point along the borders of the map. "That is the Boeotia men feel safe about. Then there is the Boeotia Within. *That* is the Boeotia without borders. The one that slips into households and castles with the grains of sand caught in the heels of men's boots."

"Yes, Excellency," the generals said.

"And now, what is this?" *Thunk.*

Their voices rang out. "Boeotia!"

* * *

Ziri was always my best friend, even though she was two years younger. She was obstinate, and a know-it-all, and when I was fourteen and desired the notice of boys, I wreaked terrible cruelties on her in the form of neglect and taunting and denial. Yet during those years we would meet each evening after the sun had fallen, outside the Empress' library door to listen to briefings or the restless shuffling of the Empress reading, alone. Many apologies went unspoken but not un-offered there. I would gesture to Ziri, wordless, and she would sit before

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State of the E-zine

By Jeremy Whitted

This is the time of year when we get all the 'State of…' speeches. From the President, to the governors, to the mayors, they all offer us an annual report on that over which they have stewardship. So, in that spirit, I thought I'd offer a 'State of Deep Magic' speech…well, essay. And in the tradition of politicians everywhere, all the good stuff is my doing, and the bad stuff is not my fault.

Deep Magic is owned and operated by Amberlin, Inc. Due to the tremendous support we received last year, Amberlin, Inc. (formerly The Amberlin Group, LLC) is now a non-profit corporation operating out of the state of Idaho. We are still in the process of applying for and receiving 501(c)3 status, which among other things makes all donations to Deep Magic tax deductible in the United States. This process takes quite some time, but we will keep readers updated on the status.

The number of people subscribing to Deep Magic is currently over 1300 and rising steadily each month. In fact, with the exception of one month when I had to purge a few months' worth of bad email addresses, we have never declined in subscribers during a month—we have always increased. We also know that not everyone who reads Deep Magic subscribes, and that one copy of the e-zine is often read by more than one person. Our goal for 2005 is to increase this number to 2500. This is a lofty goal, but one we feel is achievable.

Deep Magic does not currently pay for stories that appear in the e-zine. Despite this, we continue to receive many submissions. We hope to increase the number of quality submissions this year, and if our next fundraiser proves successful, we hope to start offering a nominal amount for stories published in Deep Magic. Though this will start out as a small amount, we hope to increase it over the next few years. The long-term goal for Deep Magic is to become a professional-level paying e-zine. We will, of course, need reader support to do so. Details on the upcoming fundraiser will hopefully be included in the March 2005 issue.

In 2004, we switched the software running our message board to Invision Power Boards. This new software is much more robust than what we previously had and has allowed for more features to be added. We have also launched the Kenatos website, part of our world-building project we offered to all our readers. Kenatos grows every month, with more and more details of this world being explored and created by authors all over the world. Additionally, our book reviews website was launched in 2004, containing all reviews that have appeared in Deep Magic. The writing craft website was also redesigned and contains articles from Deep Magic that explore the craft of writing.

The past year also brought an exciting new format for Deep Magic: PocketDM. Users who wish to view Deep Magic on their PDAs (PocketPC and Palm) can now download PocketDM. If you compare it to other e-zines available in this format, we believe you will see it as the highest-quality PDA e-zine on the market—and it is still free. Almost without exception, PocketDM releases on the same day as the regular version of Deep Magic.

On the print side of the house, 2004 saw the publication of *Silverkin*, Jeff Wheeler's sequel to *Landmoor*, as well as our second anthology. Sales have been disappointing for our print publications, but we are proud of them and will continue to publish our anthologies.

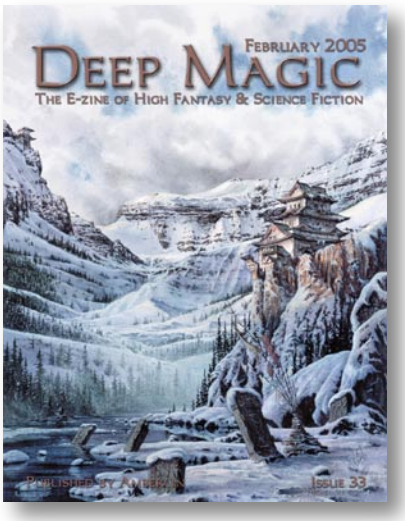
One final point to make is to bring up our fantastic volunteer staff. It's an evolving staff, with new members coming on board and old members leaving to pursue bigger and better things. However, one thing remains the same: our staff is the reason we continue to put out the quality we do every month. They are talented and dedicated, and we are forever indebted to them.

As you can see, 2004 was a very busy year and our most productive yet. We don't plan on letting up in 2005. In May, we hope to have a booth at Opus, so anyone in the Denver area is welcome to stop by and see us. This will be a gauge for us to determine how well events like this will work for us. With a fundraiser, the possibility of becoming a paying e-zine, a third anthology, and much more, we have high expectations for this year. We thank you, our readers, for your continued support. Our forums are open around the clock, so stop by, register, and get to know the staff and other readers of Deep Magic. We think it's a friendly place, and we welcome new members.

Thank you,

Jeremy Whitted
Chief Editor
Deep Magic

Featured Artist
Rob Alexander



Age: 38
Residence: Oregon, USA
Marital Status: Married
Children: 1 boy
Hobbies: Cooking (I make a lot of mean French soups, and I love Chinese cooking), cycling, and of course, ice hockey and skating (hey, I am Canadian, after all).
Personal Quote: Don't really have one.
Favorite Book or Author: Too easy. *Lord of the Rings*. And yes, loved the movies. I got to go to the WETA workshops once. It was great.
Professional and Educational Information: Two years at the Alberta College of Art, 1.5 years at the School of Visual Concepts in Seattle. Then I started picking up freelance jobs and had enough time to do school work or paying work. I opted to get paid, left school, and have been a freelancer ever since.
Started Painting In: All my life, it seems. Drew all through school, got serious about it in the last year of high school, as I could not see doing anything else for 40 years without going nuts. Was actually enrolled in engineering in a University before I dropped it the day before classes were due to start and switched to art. Math and science are my strong suits, but they don't hold my interest the way art does. I finished school in 1991, so I guess you could say that was when I started, as that was the year I began to freelance.
Artist Most Inspired By: Can I only list one?! I love the old masters—Vermeer, Rembrandt and Reubens leap to mind, as do Sargent, Alma Tadema and Waterhouse, the Bougereaus, Parrish and Gerome. Landscape masters like Church and Bierstadt are also very high on the list.
Media You Work In: About 95% watercolor, the rest oil, with one or two forays into digital.
Where Your Work Has Been Published or Displayed: Numerous book and magazine covers and interiors in North America, and the game cards such as Magic: The Gathering and the Lord of the Rings have been published around the world. I have a book of my artwork coming out in April of next year from Paper Tiger, and that will also be available around the world, in many markets.
Where Someone Can Buy Your Art or Contact You Professionally: E-mail is best (rob@robalexander.com).
Website URL: http://www.robalexander.com

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Q: How did you come to be an artist?
A: Sort of started out that way, I guess. I loved to draw in school, and basically, I looked for any excuse to draw. Science reports, book reports, margins of old text books and notebooks, doodles of D&D characters, you name it, I found an excuse to draw it. It was always just for fun, with no real emphasis on the finished project being anything to look at or keep afterwards. I even joined a local art club when I was in my early teens, and took 1 or 2 years of art in high school. The odd thing is I then dropped art in favor of academic pursuits, as I was raised with the idea that no one ever makes a living at art, and that it should be relegated to a hobby. As I mentioned, I was enrolled in engineering right up until school started, before I did all my teenage rebelling in one fell swoop and changed to an art curriculum. Didn't thrill my folks in the least at first, but they came around eventually. Unfortunately, even more than raising me to feel that I had to be self-sufficient and therefore needed a "real" job, they raised me to feel that if you worked hard enough at something, you could not help but succeed. So, even though I was horrible at art, I threw myself into it, busted my buns all through school and have never regretted my choice to become an artist.

Q: How would you describe your work?
A: In a word, I suppose it's story telling. One thing I have always loved about my job is that I get to tell stories with a pencil and paintbrush. I grew up listening to stories, and reading everything I could get my hands on. Now, I am a lousy writer, but I do have a strong visual imagination, and for me, there is nothing quite as satisfying as reading a novel or taking a card description and distilling it down to a single moment in time, finding a way to sum up and capture the whole of it in a single illustration. If I can do that, then I can connect with the audience, tell them the story as I see it and bring them into my world, at least for a little while.

Q: Where do you find your inspiration?
A: In reality, I suppose everywhere. But what I think you're asking is "where do I go when I am fresh out of ideas?" The answer to that is, I go for a walk. Somewhere in nature. I don't like big cities, never have, but I can't go for a walk through a field or forest without being very inspired. It was a desire to paint landscapes that got me started painting in the first place when I was a child, and it remains my strongest influence. Partly, it's the complexity in nature, the way everything works together, the harmony and tranquility, everything coexisting so intimately, while at the same time, the constant life and death struggles going on everywhere around me. It invariably gets me thinking about my assignments in new ways, opens up my mind, and before I know it, I'm reaching for a sketch book or high tailing it back to the studio.

Q: What inspired this piece? (Tell us its story...)
A: Oddly enough, this is a good question to follow the one about inspiration. It was done for AEG (Alderac Entertainment Group), and the art director was, I believe, most familiar with all the landscape work I had done for Magic: The Gathering and the Lord of the Rings. Most

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notably, my mountainscapes. I grew up on the edge of the Canadian Rockies and spent a lot of time hiking them in the summers and skiing them in the winters. I loved those times, and as a result, I jumped at any opportunity to paint rugged, snow capped peaks. So, when I got the call for this piece, my art direction was "Give me a Rob Alexander mountainscape with a Japanese castle on a hillside." That was about it. So, after turning in a few sketches, the art director and I settled on a design, and I was off and running.

Q: What do you consider your influences?
A: Well, all the old master painters that I mentioned above. Also Tolkien, very strongly. I had a 2nd grade teacher who read to us every morning, to settle us down first thing. She read "The Hobbit" and "The Fellowship of the Ring," and I've been a huge fantasy fan ever since. Also, as you may have guessed, the natural world plays a huge role in my art, and my influences. As I mentioned, it was landscape art that I did first as a child, and I still love painting the world around me.

On a more direct level, as I work in watercolor, but need to compete with oil and acrylic painters, I also studied the Victorian watercolor and body color artists—folks who combined transparent and opaque watercolors to create something similar to an oil painting while still retaining many of the wonderful characteristics and appealing qualities of watercolor.

Q: What has been your greatest success in your artistic career?
A: Kind of a tossup. Putting together a book of my own artwork is very high on the list, but so is the first paperback cover I did, as well as being part of the whole trading card game phenomenon. I have wanted to put together a collection of my work for a long time, and I love the fact that it's now done (we are in the proofing stages, so all the hard work on my end is done with). I will never cease to smile and feel ecstatic when I walk into a bookstore and see an image of mine on the shelf, but there's no time like the first time. Similarly, I can remember going to conventions and seeing groups of kids sprawled on the floor, playing Magic, or Lord of the Rings, card wrappers strewn about them, completely immersed in the game, and I couldn't help but feel almost giddy at being a part of that.

Q: What trends are you seeing in the Sci-Fi/ Fantasy genre?
A: I suppose, I would have to say diversification and accessibility.

What I will call the science fiction and fantasy market has always ebbed and flowed with artists finding room to stretch and grow, to explore and be different, only to then see the trend reverse itself. There is a cycle to it, and I feel we are in the midst of an expansion right now. The mainstream consumer is not only accepting this type of art, they are actively seeking it. The entertainment industry, movies and

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video games are continuing to grow and are becoming more and more visual as well as more sophisticated in their ability to convey those visuals. As a result, as the markets continue to grow and the opportunities and outlets expand, there is more and more room for different types of art, different looks and styles. The obvious biggie is digital art, but there are also artists who give a strong nod to old masters, like Donato. There are more and more watercolorists, where there used to be almost none. There are folks making a good living doing conceptual design for video games or movies. The venues available increase, and as they do so, companies need both more artists and the ability to make things look different from the competitions. Different looks and styles, different approaches to visual problem solving.

Also, thanks to the internet and web sites, there is communication, competition and influence between artists who may never meet, or even live in the same hemisphere. We can see each other's work almost instantly. For that matter, so can art directors.

I am just as likely to get an email from a company in Europe as I am from North America. Twenty to thirty years ago, if you wanted to paint book jackets, for example, then in this country that meant you needed to live in New York. When I was first getting into the field, that was changing, and so long as you could get to Fed Ex, you could live most anywhere in the US. Now, they can and do work with artists from around the world.

The Other Side

By Mark Reeder and Ron Meyer

An uneasy, cold wind swirled along the road, spinning legends out of dream and time in the dry desert air. In the arroyo far below, the White River tumbled and smashed onto rocks and boulders, the sound rising like whispered secrets. Merrick stood on the steel, girder bridge, regarding the concrete barricade in front of him. Instinct told him that something important lay beyond it. Maybe the object he was looking for. He walked from one side of the barrier to the other but saw no way through for his rented Ford Explorer.

The country all around was steep ridges and steeper canyons, striped by slanting swatches of pink and yellow stone, and filled with a great emptiness. Fifteen miles behind him lay Bonanza, a town of 350—the only people in ten thousand square miles of scrub desert. It was also the gateway to the Barrier Canyons Area he was exploring. He had already investigated several other sites today and had come up empty. Now this latest promising lead had been blocked.

He walked back to the SUV and, leaning his long frame through the window, picked up his road atlas. He quickly thumbed through the dog-eared, coffee-stained pages until he found the map of Utah. He studied it and blinked. "I'll be damned," he said and frowned. The map showed the road went through. He checked the atlas's date, already knowing that it would say 2005: this year.

The map showed the road went through. He checked the atlas's date, already knowing that it would say 2005: this year. He looked at the barrier again, this time with the eyes of a trained archaeologist. At least twenty years of weathering on that concrete, he judged.

He looked at the barrier again, this time with the eyes of a trained archaeologist. At least twenty years of weathering on that concrete, he judged. He rubbed his bent nose—smashed flat and broken in Cincinnati's underground fight clubs—wondering why the map indicated the road ran free and clear, when it had obviously been blocked for so many years. He shrugged; another of life's annoying little conundrums.

He chucked the atlas onto the passenger seat and picked up a chamois cloth sack, the kind jewelers use for conveying precious stones. He upended it and a piece of ancient, blue-green jade tumbled into his palm. Precisely carved, the stone depicted the finely tufted point and the delicate inner whorls of a jaguar's ear. A jagged edge showed where it had broken away from the original sculpture. Spidery hand writing on a yellowed label told part of its story: "1926, Utah, Olmec." Merrick knew that this fragment of the Olmec Jaguar God had been unearthed seventy-five years ago in this area—a place it had no business being. Why no one had investigated this anomaly before now, he did not know. But then, archaeology was replete with exotic, unsolved puzzles and forgotten mysteries.

He turned back to the concrete bulwark and stared beyond it. The fiery hulk of the sun lay on the western ridges. He had the feeling, which an archaeologist is lucky to sense a few

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Rules of Writing: Write Before Rewriting

By Mike Stackpole

Rules of Writing is a series of articles. These rules are the result of years of writing and talking with other writers. They are trail-blazes: they will keep you oriented in the correct direction. Slavish adherence to these rules will not make you or your work brilliant, but it will save your work from being utterly wretched.

Rule #7: Write it before you rewrite it: Aside from not writing at all, the greatest mistake made by writers is going back over and continually refining old work. I can't count the number of times I've heard writers say, "I'm working on a novel and I have a perfect first chapter."

Let's make this very clear: a perfect chapter is **not** a novel. It is a chapter. There is not much of a call for chapters, perfect or otherwise. There aren't many writers who are known as *chapterists*. There is neither a Pulitzer nor a Nobel for chapters, and you can tell that the National Book Award is looking for a bit more than just a chapter, too.

The simple fact of the matter is this: you're not a novelist until you've finished a novel. Rewriting a single chapter two dozen times does not make you a novelist. Writing twenty-four chapters brings you a lot closer to being a novelist *and* allows you to confront a number of plot problems that appear in novels, but never appear in single chapters.

There are going to be times when you'll find you're at chapter seven and you've made a big mistake about your main character. Up to chapter seven, she's been an orphan, but as you start chapter seven you realize that her having an elderly father in a nursing home would work out really well. You've got six chapters, however, with her mentioning that she's an orphan.

A word processor makes it very simple to open up those first six chapters, hunt down those mentions and excise them. And you can fix all sorts of other little stuff in there in the process. And you never were really satisfied with the conversation in chapter four, so you mess with that, too… And, and, and…

There is a much more simple and better way to deal with things. Starting with chapter seven, your main character has an elderly father. Period. You just deal with that new reality from that point forward. On your manuscript, or in your notebook, you note "Add Dad from the start." In the course of revising the novel, you put the dad into the story.

The reason it is better to handle it this way is simple. As you write the rest of the novel, you'll develop both characters and their relationship. The knowledge you get through *that* process will show you exactly the sort of material you need to put into the first six chapters to set everything else up. The process of making notes and refining things in revision will work for any problem you run into.

There is one caveat to this. There *are* times when you're working on a story that you write yourself into a corner. It generally happens when the story veers off and you can tell three to four pages further along that you're heading toward a dead end. Once you begin to get that feeling, back up and look at where things went wrong. Cut everything from that point to the end of the chapter, save it into another file, and start again. Technically it's revising, but I prefer to think of

it as a cabinetmaker junking some bad wood. (It's amazing how good it can feel to toss away text and realize that your story is not ruined.)

And let's make no mistake about it, revision is the key to good writing. That's where you knock off the bad bits and really polish up the good stuff. Learning to spot errors and repair them is crucial if you're going to have a career.

In the science fiction and fantasy field, an unfortunately large number of beginning writers quote a venerable old author—often Heinlein or Pohl—as saying "Refrain from rewriting except to editorial order." (This quote is actually from Robert A. Heinlein.) These are individuals who, for various reasons, believe their work does not need revision, and they use the quote as if it is a cloak of invulnerability or some such twaddle.

The problem with clinging to this quote is twofold:

1) Very few writers have the talent of a Heinlein. (If you think you do, you likely don't, and *if* you do, others would have told you so long since.)

2) The above quote is only part of what Heinlein said on the matter. Continuing, he added, "This does not mean you shouldn't do another draft whenever necessary. It means that once you've told your story as well and as clearly as you possibly can, don't play around with it making unnecessary changes except when an editor will insist on and **pay** for you making those changes."

Amen.

If you want to be a writer, get the work down first. Finish what you start, make it as good as you can, then send it out. Do that and you're on your way to building up a library where every book-spine has your name on it.

If you are interested in reading more of Mike Stackpole's Rules of Writing, as well as his other articles for writings, you can find information here.

Imoen's Arrow

By Robert Shell

Jayel had sometimes hated his father, but ever since the old codger had gone off and died, he missed him terribly. He stood in the garden, surrounded by the work of his father's hands; it was here that he always missed him the most. Walking with care, he examined the rows of seedlings. Ash, aspen, red maple, white oak, and a dozen other varieties that he would someday plant in the forest, just as his father had done. They would be harvested years from now, a bounty for the future. As he looked around at what still needed to be done, his heart grew heavy with despair. If he could make it through another day, he might even start thinking about the future again.

The sun stood midway to noon, and he still a lot of work to do, more than enough for a single woodcarver. Still, the village wanted it of him, which always seemed to make him a little angry for some reason. Ever since his parents had died from the plague last winter, he had been expected to do all his father had done. It was impossible! There was simply too much to do. Shingles that were blown off in last week's storm, a new door for the inn, and with the brewery still making cider and brandy from last fall's apples, there were always barrels to make. The burden of becoming a man weighed heavily on his shoulders.

The rumblings of his stomach interrupted his thoughts. Breakfast was too long ago, and lunch still needed to be made. With a sigh, he started back toward home. He was nearly there, when he heard the plaintive voice of his sister Imoen. "It may not be in the valley, but it matters not when I'll see you again." Jayel swallowed the lump in his throat, and for a moment he seemed to hear his mother's voice singing as well. It was her song.

Then he saw it, a large shadow moving under the trees. Bracing his bow with one leg, he pulled the top down and in a deft motion had hooked the string, preparing it to shoot.

He paused as he crested the hill, and felt his heart warm with the familiar sight of home. His father had built the stone cottage before he married Jayel's mother, and she had planted the flowers and plants that surrounded it. Now, ivy and hummingbird vine covered the stones, green leaves and red flowers that seemed to shelter the tiny home. His sister sat in the sunlight and polished their mother's two silver candlesticks with her gray skirt. Long raven hair was tied back with a violet ribbon, and her clear voice rang in the morning air. She had turned fifteen just a few weeks ago, but Jayel would forever see her as his little sister.

She stopped singing when he came towards her, blushing to know that he had heard her. "Good morning, Jayel," she said. "Did you have any breakfast before you left this morning?" When their parents had died, Jayel had taken over their father's responsibilities. Imoen did her best to fill their mother's, but she could be a little too mothering for Jayel. Sometimes he resented it. Well, mostly resented. There were times it was nice to be mothered.

Jayel removed his hat and wiped his shaved head with a handkerchief. "I was actually thinking about having strawberries and cream for an early lunch. What do you say about a trip down into the woods, Imoen? I was going to look for blown down branches anyway." He laughed

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ISBN: 1586490052

Silverkin

The anticipated sequel to Landmoor has finally arrived, continuing the adventures of Thealos Quickfellow.

Deeper Magic:

The next collection of short stories compiled from the second year of Deep Magic.

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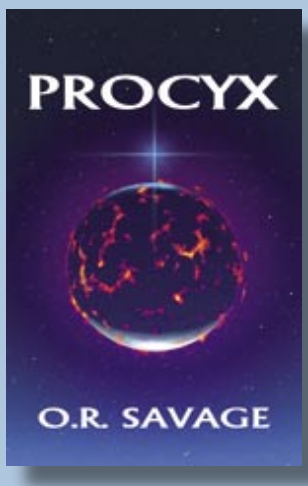

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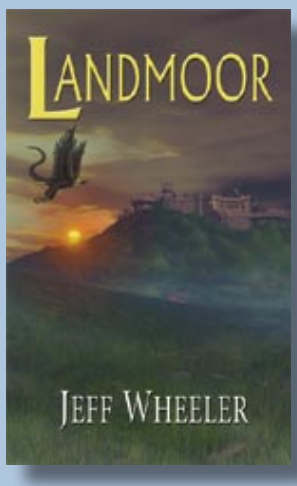

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Editor's Choice: Fantasy

The Paths of the Dead
By Steven Brust

Steven Brust has written nearly two dozen novels so far in his career and nearly all of them take place in the world of the Dragaeran Empire. The majority of these books follow mercenary Vlad Taltos on his various adventures. However, about a decade ago, Brust shifted gears to focus on an earlier period of Dragaeran history, writing the Khaavren romances, which are wonderful pastiches and homages to Alexander Dumas' adventure novels, especially **The Three Musketeers**. The end of the Khaavren romances, however, left the Dragaeran Empire destroyed, the land suffering under the lawlessness of an Interregnum, and many, many years until the day of Vlad Taltos.

Brust's most recent series, **The Viscount of Adrilankha**, fills in those gaps, detailing the years between the two series. The first book, **The Paths of the Dead**, opens about two hundred years after the fall of the Dragaeran Empire. Even though there has been no Empire, there has also been no adventure. Life is fairly taciturn and uneventful. However, a warlord from the House of Dragon is slowly gaining power and land as he attempts to re-establish the empire and put himself on its throne as emperor, in violation of the Great Cycle established by the gods wherein the throne goes to each of the Dragaeran 'houses' (i.e., clans) in a set order.

The gods, of course, are not pleased, and so they begin to maneuver to bring Zerika, the young heir of the house of Phoenix (which was thought to be destroyed when the Empire fell), to the throne.

Written in the same mock-Dumas voice as the Khaavren romances, **The Paths of the Dead** begins tracing the events that lead to the restoration of the Dragaeran Empire. As a fantasy of political intrigue, it is as good as political fantasy gets, but what adds to it and makes it even better as a story is the mock-Dumas tone that Brust pulls off almost perfectly.

For those who haven't read Dumas, he wrote in a time when the language was full of stock phrases and mannerisms that today's ear hears as pretentious and wooden. Thus, it takes a while to get used to hearing the voices of these characters, but once you get into the feel of this form of narration, it is quite enjoyable. However, this style may not be for everyone; indeed, I almost didn't make it through the book, so thick was the pretentious voice. To help with this, Theresa Nielsen Hayden has written a guide at the back of the book to help explain (with tongue firmly planted in cheek) the narrative method being employed. I recommend reading that early on in your reading of the novel if you find yourself having trouble adjusting to the narrative style of a different age. Once you do, though, I believe you'll quickly see just how engaging the story actually is.

Possible objectionable material: none.

(Reviewed by Matthew Scott Winslow)

continued on next page

Book Review: Fantasy

Voyage of the Shadowmoon

By Sean McMullen

The Emperor Warsovran has uncovered a great weapon that, when properly wielded, can give him the edge he needs to conquer the land of the Moonworlds. The weapon, Silverdeath, however, takes over Warsovran when he first attempts to use it, and he doesn't regain control of it until it has destroyed the continent of Torea in a huge ring of fire. The only people known to have survived the destruction of Torea are the crew of of the vessel **Shadowmoon**.

On board the **Shadowmoon** are its lusty captain, Ferran, who seduces (or attempts to) every woman in sight; the vampire Laron who, upon arriving from our world to the world of Moonworlds, has been trapped within the body of a 14-year old for 700 years; and Velander and Terikel, priestesses of a nearly extinct goddess religion.

They survive due to some quick thinking on the part of Velander who realizes the wall of fire is coming, and due to the fact that there is more to the **Shadowmoon** than its small, unobtrusive appearance leads one to believe. Using one of the secret weapons of the **Shadowmoon**, the passengers and crew survive the wall of fire and then set out to track down Silverdeath and keep it from being used again.

The crew and passengers, however, are not all of like mind about how to retrieve Silverdeath, nor about how best to use it once it is found.

Were the internal machinations of the passengers and crew of the **Shadowmoon** not enough, every king and emperor is also looking for this powerful weapon, with spies everywhere.

The Voyage of the Shadowmoon is the first of a projected trilogy, entitled **The Moonworlds Saga**, the second book of which, **Glass Dragons,** has just come out in hardcover. The story is a winsome blend of standard fantasy tropes with nautical adventure: think Patrick O'Brien meets Terry Brooks, or Robin Hobbs' Liveship trilogy infused with more high-court intrigue. However you want to look at it, **Voyage of the Shadowmoon** is the first of what looks to be a promising series. The combination of expected tropes leads to what feels to be both standard fantasy fare as well as a fresh take on ideas that are starting to feel worn.

The aforementioned machinations are where McMullen shines best: beneath the nautical adventures lies intrigue, as more sides than I can count maneuver to obtain for themselves the awesome power of Silverdeath. With a few exceptions, however, there is no Ultimately Evil Bad Guy in this series (so far). Instead, we face groups of varying morality who are trying to gain (or thwart) power. McMullen accomplishes this through shifting the point of view so that, as each party moves to find Silverdeath, the reader finds sympathy with that party's motives, if not always with that party's moves.

As with any book that is consciously part of a 'saga' or trilogy or larger series that is not episodic in nature, there are plot threads that are left dangling, that are not fully explained, or that seem to be totally abandoned this far in the story. However, for the most part, **Voyage of the Shadowmoon** is fairly stand-alone and can be enjoyed without a feeling that further commitment is needed.

Possible objectionable material: there is some suggestion of sexual situations but nothing explicit.

(Reviewed by Matthew Scott Winslow)

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me while I used my own precious bone comb to wrestle the daily sand and tangles from her hair, then plait its titian lengths and bind the braid with a ribbon.

It seemed we spoke a quiet language there. I too prideful to ask her forgiveness, and she too devoted to me not to give it anyway.

Often we would fall asleep across the doorway, and the Empress would step quietly past us when she left, her long skirts dragging over us like momentary quilts. I never saw her face. By then all the torches would be snuffed, and the Empress kept a red kerchief to her face as well, into which she often coughed delicately as she passed. I had it firmly in my fancies that she was my mother, because I'd had none I could remember. Therefore, this coming and going was just right for orphan fantasies – the comfort of quilts, the shadowed face – and I could imagine her any way I cared to.

Except for her voice, which I knew from listening at doors. And except for what she asked of Ziri and I, two years later, which I know no mother could bring herself to ask.

* * *

The sandstorm hit us a week into the desert. For half a day it looked like a cloud. Then within moments, Gerlund was throwing supplies from his camel madly, shouting to us, and suddenly the sand was in our hair, our mouths, our eyes. We sprinted for a rock outcropping, even the lumbering camels, and nestled up in the relative safety of a thin boulder. We huddled under the canvas of our tent, laid over us haphazardly, tucked in tight around the edges. The storm had surprised even Gerlund, and that was how we knew it was terrible. Ziri wept a little for the camels, but fought to keep a brave face. Gerlund patted her back, his soldier's hand gentle.

"There, there. The beasts are better off than we are," he said. "They turn into stones in storms like this, did you know that?"

She shook her head, tear tracks making dark smears down her cheeks. The sand zithered and hissed over us, and I could feel the weight of it piling upon us, pressing us down.

"That's right. Just like stone. They close their eyes tight, even their noses, then they simply curl up and wait it out."

"You're certain?" she said.

Gerlund nodded. Sand had gotten stuck in his thick, black beard and eyebrows, prematurely aging him. "Of course I am. Haven't I traveled this desert a hundred times already? Two of those trips I brought back orphans for the Empress," he said, and Ziri smiled.

The sandstorm blew for two hours, and then as suddenly as it began, it ended. When we emerged, having to dig ourselves out of several layers of heavy sand, we found that the camels had indeed become like stone, the drifts piled up at their backs. Then they opened their wet eyes, grumbled to their feet, and spit in our general direction. The storm was the strangest thing we saw in the desert during our crossing that time, but I have since seen, driven, and commanded stranger landscapes, more dangerous entities.

* * *

Gerlund was a gruff companion, but within days I understood why the Empress sent him with us. Our company had to be small so as to go mostly unnoticed. Gerlund, despite his blustering ways, could pass well as a father with two daughters, and he was an excellent

provider. In the three weeks it took to get to the edge of the Scourgelands, we never ran short of food or water. He taught us to find water in the desert cacti and bring down the rangy desert hares with slings, which might have made Ziri sad again had one not struggled and scratched her, still slightly alive when she went to retrieve it.

At the edge of the Scourgelands, still within the safety of the outer woods, Gerlund traded our camels for pack mules. Ziri named hers Button, and though I didn't say so out loud, inwardly I called mine Maxilious. Under the disapproving gaze of the trade station owner, we set out into the deeper woods of the Scourgelands.

The chill, green wetness of the place was very different from the desert we'd known all our lives. Even the oasis of the Empress' fortress, with its ponds, trees and meadows tucked secretly inside the formidable, jag-toothed hills, did not compare to the verdant landscape, the pines tall as turrets, the thick grass underfoot cushioning our steps. We slept each night within the ring of salt and silver around our tiny tent and heard only the most faraway shrieks and screams that barely disturbed our slumber. We saw flowered vines, in colors so bright they seemed made of painted glass, and sleek gray wolves in the mists at dawn. We put our arms around tree trunks so wide that not even the three of us together could embrace them. I cannot say why the Scourgelands chose to appear to us as something so beautiful in that time. I know, as do others, that its landscape is as mercurial as the winds in the desert. To this day, in spite of everything, I am still in love with the memory of those whispering hills, that shallow blue sky so different from the desert expanse, the grasses, the bold auburn does that peeked at us through the trees.

The Scourgelands seemed untouched and untouchable until the fourth week, when we at last came upon the army camped in one of the valleys. Even before reaching the rim of the valley we saw signs of them. The enormous pines had been rendered stumps, bloody with sap. Wagon wheels had carved ruts through the grasses. And when we looked down from the heights, we saw a wide-open space like the pockmark of some catastrophe, the landscape completely cleared of anything resembling natural growth.

In the center of it they had erected a garrison of the felled pines, the trunks set deep into the earth and their tips carved into sharp spears. Within the pine walls tents poked up and men swarmed around like beetles. Smoke rose with the dusk in wispy threads, and we saw wagons with more logs coming in from the opposite end of the valley, where the army endeavored to push its way deeper into the heart of the Scourgelands. We were all three quiet for a time, wishing, I believe, that we had never found them. Then Gerlund spoke.

"You remember the message?" he asked.

We nodded as one.

"And have you got your bearings? North, south, east, west?" He pointed as he spoke to four points over the valley. We nodded again.

"Well then. You'll be safe inside the garrison for tonight."

"What about you?" I asked.

He smiled a little. "I'll be just as safe outside. Plenty of salt left. Remember, the attack won't come for another night. By then we'll have our prize, and we'll make the circle to wait it out."

"Tomorrow, then," I said. "In the camp?"

"In the camp." He nodded. "I shouldn't have any trouble getting in. They're looking for monsters, not men. You two look a little clean. You'd best dirty your faces."

We rubbed grass and dirt onto our cheeks and into our skirts. Gerlund eyed us critically, then drew his dagger and made a tear in the hem of my skirt, ripping it. He did the same to one

of Ziri's sleeves. Then, under the guise of patting our heads encouragingly, he roughed up our hair. With that he took two mules and left us with one. We made our way down into the valley over the course of an hour, and soon were headed straight for the garrison gates. We must have looked like a mirage to the men guarding them. They stared at us, slack-jawed, for some time as we came closer.

"Please, sir," Ziri said, as rehearsed. "We're looking for our father. He's with the army here. Mother's died, and we – we have nowhere else to go. The moneylenders took everything. They said Father had debts. We've come to find him, so that he can get our home back." I almost smiled to myself as her eyes teared.

"How did you two make it all this way by yourselves?" one of the men asked.

"How are you still alive?" the other man echoed.

Ziri burst into tears and clasped herself to me miserably. This time, I had to hide my face in her hair to compose myself. She was putting on a masterful act.

"We're very tired, and hungry," she said after a moment. Then she shuddered. "There are terrible things about the woods at night. We've barely slept for keeping torches lit. We only want to find our father."

The soldiers were visibly moved. "What's his name, dove?" The first soldier moved closer.

"Terrick," I replied. "Terrick Ornithson."

If I ever had any doubt of the Empress' plan, it was gone in that instant. Both men's faces went slack and pale, and they looked at each other.

"Ah, you poor things," the kinder soldier whispered. "You poor girls."

They led us into the compound, and one of them saw to our mule while the other ushered us, as expected, straight to the Duke's tent set near the western wall of the garrison.

Terrick Ornithson, Gerlund had told us, was dead. How the Empress had known of him, or his death, was a mystery. He had two daughters, still presumably safe somewhere in Alkire. He had been, four months earlier, the Duke's favored general, and a favorite among the men besides. He'd died saving the Duke's life during the first Scourge attack they'd encountered. Had we greased keys we could not have slipped the lock of the Duke's guard easier than this. It was for that the Empress had chosen us.

* * *

The Duke's tent was sparse but comfortable. A sleeping cot was half-hidden behind a curtain at the far end. The kind soldier offered us bread and cold mountain water, and showed us to a seat at the Duke's council table. A parchment map— neither as fine nor detailed as the Empress'— covered it, weighed down at the corners with stones. A cluster of pinecones to the right of a wooden soldier figurine seemed to indicate they thought the Scourge hordes were amassing to the west. If the Empress was right, they were very wrong.

While we waited, we dabbed our sleeves in the water and scrubbed our faces, then tidied one another's hair. I pulled a round amulet from my pocket and hid it in the palm of my hand, separated from my flesh with a square of leather.

"I'm worried," Ziri said, though her voice didn't betray it.

"It's all right," I said. "This is the part where I talk." I didn't tell her I was worried too, if worry was to blame for the worm burrowing uneasily in my belly.

The Duke knew General Ornithson's family well. He would not be fooled by us. What happened when he saw us depended wholly on how well I presented myself. Gerlund had

relayed instructions from the Empress along the way. Even sending us into the Scourgelands did not merit a personal audience with her, but I didn't mind. The Empress was what she was. I could no more complain about that, than over having been fed, clothed, and housed all my life, saved from a life in the alleys of Kenatos.

The Empress, through Gerlund, had taught me many things about presenting myself to a Duke. When we heard footsteps outside the tent, we both rose and stood at the head of the table. The Duke entered first, a tall man with a fair face, except for the deep scars running down his left cheek, distorting his pleasant features on that side. He was young for the Dukedom and all its responsibilities. Yet, from what I knew, the Empress had helped him achieve that. I imagine she had not warned him about the dangers of succession, the complicities which had led him to this place. His weary eyes said as much.

"Miria? Senaya?"

It took only moments for his eyes to adjust to the gloom of the tent. I stepped in front of Ziri.

"My name is Hezal. I've come with a message from the Empress. Do not call your guard in, my Lord. What I have is for you only." I am certain my voice did not shake. Nonetheless he turned back to the tent's opening. Before he could call out, I threw the amulet on the table, then tucked the piece of leather back in my pocket. It clinked down on the wood, rolled on its edge over the map, and fell over, the gold flashing in the gloom. It did not have a chain. It had been ripped from its chain once, and now was no more than currency, albeit of a very unusual type.

At the sound, he turned back. He eyed the amulet. Then he looked back at us. I could feel Ziri peeking around my shoulder.

"What does the Empress want with me now?" he said. I do not think he meant to, but he let his shoulders slump.

"She wishes to warn you," I said. I leaned over the map, and took up one of the pinecones marking the Scourge hordes' location.

"Your map is inaccurate. The Scourge is here." I placed the cone to the east. "And here," I said, taking up another and placing it in the north. "And here." One to the south. One to the southeast. One to the northwest, and on and on until I'd exhausted his pile and the pinecones stretched all around the wooden soldier in a thick, bristly perimeter.

His face paled as he eyed his wooden soldier. His stroked his youthful beard. Then he looked up at me.

"Is this true?" he murmured.

I nodded, and at the sight of his horrified expression, softened my own somewhat. "It is true, my lord."

"Then how have you come to be here, through that?" He pointed at the map.

"Salt and silver shavings, my lord. The Scourge beasts can tolerate neither. All the packs on our animals are filled with it," I replied honestly, then flinched inwardly. Would he notice I had just mentioned more than one animal? He did not appear to, and I resolved to be more careful.

"They will attack at moonrise, night after this," I added quickly. "Your army will fall. The garrison will not keep them out. That is the way it was meant to be. You were sent here to die, not to purge the Scourgelands for the glory of Alkire. Your enemies knew this. Your…king… knew this."

He narrowed his eyes. "The Empress sent you all this way to tell me this?"

"No." I shook my head. Ziri had come out from behind me.

"She sent us to save you," she blurted.

It was truth, of a sort. I nodded. He looked at Ziri, and his eyes softened.

"The Empress does not wish for your enemies to come to power in Alkire," I told him.

The Duke reached over to pick up the amulet from the table. He rolled it in his fingers thoughtfully.

"I tore this from my father's neck when he died," he said quietly. "The Empress' poison was…painful for him. He gave me this with his fingernails while we struggled." He touched the scar on his cheek. "I know he understood what I had done, in the end. And in the end, watching him shriek and flail and slobber like a mad dog…it still did not make up for all the beatings when I was a boy. But he was mad, a monster worse than any in the Scourgelands, I am certain. What he did to me, my younger brother…it had to stop."

I did not reply. He clenched his fist around the amulet.

"I sent this to the Empress as she requested, when he was dead. She said she would use it to call in her favor someday. Yet you've asked me for no favor."

"The amulet was to prove to you who we were," I said. "The favor is two-fold. One, to come with us and live. The other I may not speak of now."

He stood still for a very long time. I could hear Ziri breathing beside me. Finally, he tossed the amulet back on the table.

"I cannot." His voice was hoarse. "I would apologize, but I know it would be a feeble justification. But I cannot save myself over my men. If sending me here was meant to kill me, then sending me with an army has doomed five hundred men to their deaths because of me. I cannot run away."

"Oh, please do come!" Ziri cried out. Her tender heart had gotten the better of her. "Isn't it better to save at least one life, than none at all? Even if it is your own? Something good must come of all this!"

The Duke smiled at her sadly, and shook his head. "You equate goodness with survival. But you are not a soldier. Neither was I, before coming here. When Ornithson died saving my life I came to understand more clearly. What is good is doing what is right by those who follow you."

He looked straight at me. "Give the Empress my apologies. Tell her I will not be able to repay her favor, and will go to my grave in her debt."

I nodded. It did not matter. The Empress had known he would refuse. That was the other reason she sent Gerlund.

* * *

The Duke provided us a tent for the night, expecting we would leave in the morning. It was a small tent but near his own by lucky fortune.

"What a stupid man," Ziri said, as we cloth-bathed in chilly water brought by soldiers. "What was his name again?"

"Rishar," I told her, feeling the weight of several days' grime fall from me. The water and the air were cold though, so I finished quickly, dried myself with a felt towel provided us, and dressed again. I tucked myself into the cot's blankets thankfully.

"Rishar. What a stupid man," Ziri said again, but softer. She dried herself, dressed, and came to sit at the side of my cot while I pulled my bone comb through her hair, darkened to a candent red like a wound.

"After all, we've only come to save his life," she added.

"He likes you," I said. I knew it was true. His eyes had flitted to her in my shadow enough to reveal it.

"He doesn't ever," she said.

"Of course he does," I replied. "And he isn't very old, really. Not even twenty-five yet. Older men have married younger women. And he has a fair cheek. One of them, anyway."

She giggled and elbowed my leg.

"Just think," I said. "You might be a duchess someday, and I'll curtsy and call you Madame. My lady. Will you let me work in your kitchen, Duchess? Your poor old friend Hezal?"

"I might," she said. "But you know, you've been very mean to me on occasion, Hezal."

"It was for your own good," I said.

She chuckled. "I rather think it was for yours."

I tugged at a lock of her hair until she cried out in mock-pain. "Very well! I shall let you empty my chamber pot when I am duchess. It will be your honor."

"My honor, by all means," I said, taking up plaits of her hair and twining them around my fingers for a braid.

"Do you really think he likes me, Hezal? I think he's very handsome. And as I know we're to rescue him, I might almost let myself dream of him tonight," she said.

Rescuing him, I thought suddenly, might change him. To steal him away from his ideal of rightness, without his consent…what bitterness might move into his soul for that? For us?

"He does fancy you," I replied, shaking away those thoughts. "And once we get past the fact that you're a worthless orphan, we might begin to attempt a match."

The Empress, I thought, could help with that. Suddenly I saw it very clearly, as if she had spoken it to me. Why send both of us, when one would do? Unless she suspected Rishar might be taken with Ziri, as much as the rest of us were, for her happy, earnest ways. I felt very clever. I believed I was seeing a portion of the Empress' plan that had not been revealed to me. How better to solidify alliances with Alkire than to marry it to Boeotia? The Empress had no offspring, nor any lovers. She had only her orphans. And because I admired her, I believed she meant to raise us up above the squalor of our birthrights and birth us anew to her noble purposes.

Ziri would be the first. I imagined a jewel-encrusted diadem atop the head I looked down upon, and smiled. She would be the first, and certainly the most deserving. Although I must admit, I thought acting as a duchess' lady to be my eventual fate, and it did not bother me. They wore silk too.

* * *

The next morning we rose at dawn. The camp was noisy, and the men cheerful in the crisp mountain air. Wagons rolled in and out, and there was even singing. I have, since then, come to know how men at war will often sing on the dawn or eve of a battle to bolster their spirits. Like a hunter's dogs, which whine and thump their tails when he takes up his bow or traps, they felt within them an imperative urge. These men, worn soldiers that they were, smelled the waiting on the air itself, and though they did not know the hour of the attack, they recognized its inevitable close-creeping.

The duke slept in. A soldier emerged from his tent, shaking his head and smiling as we blew on our hands in the chilly morning air.

"Dead asleep," he said. "Never seen a highborn man stay awake as many hours as his army. It was bound to come to bear on him soon."

"May we go in and wait in the tent for him?" Ziri asked. "It's so cold in the mountains. We'll stoke the fire for him, so it's warm when he wakes. He's to show us around the camp today."

The soldier glanced at us, then nodded. "I suppose. See that you don't wake him though."

We nodded, knowing full well we couldn't have if we wanted to. The oil that made the amulet from the night before shine so brilliantly would have gotten all over his hands when he touched it, the sleeping poison seeping into his skin during the night.

The soldier looked toward the back of the tent where another soldier was drawing up a wagon. The driver jumped down from the wagon and began unloading small barrels of provisions.

"Need help?" the first soldier called.

The driver waved his hand dismissively and shook his head. Our soldier wandered off toward the gates, and Ziri and I slipped into the tent.

Gerlund waited a moment or two before scratching at the back of the tent. He slipped his dagger to Ziri under the tent's edge. Then we heard him continuing the business of unloading the wagon. While Ziri cut a slit in the back of the tent, camouflaged by the morning sounds of the camp, I bound Rishar's hands and feet, and muzzled him with a scarf from my pocket. Ziri and I wrestled him from his cot onto a blanket on the floor. From there it was short work for Gerlund, with his shoulders like small hills, to drag the duke out the back of the tent, wrap him in the blanket, and heave him into the cart.

Ziri and I hid ourselves amongst the remaining kegs of provisions; Gerlund threw a tarp over us, and we were away. I truly believed with every stone the wagon's wheels bounced over that we would be discovered.

We were not. They were looking for monsters, not men; murderers, not kidnappers in the guise of girls. In the grander scheme of the camp, one sleeping duke, whose men admired him enough to let him have his rest, and two girls whom only a few had seen arrive, were easily forgotten as they went about the tasks of strengthening their garrison and eating away at the Sourgelands for the glory of Alkire.

* * *

Gerlund said they probably raised the alarm around early evening, when the first soldier returned from his daily round, asked after us, and then looked for us.

"And that's why you never allow your men to like you enough to leave you alone all day," he said. "Make them a bit nervous about you conducting surprise inspections, and they'll be peeking in on you every hour. You'll never be smuggled off in a blanket."

By then we were far away, the wagon abandoned, the poor duke slung over one of the mules like a trussed goose, and the poor mules driven to a reckless pace. After the initial alarm, Gerlund said, they would have had to search the entire camp, and each regiment reported in. By then, it was night.

And the moon had risen.

* * *

I made the circle in a flat opening between pines. The salt and silver glistened on the frost for a moment, then sank into the ground, leaving a ring of black earth large enough to surround us all. We drove the mules off, knowing they would most likely be killed, but we could not risk them panicking within the circle and breaking out of it. Gerlund drew his sword and paced the inner rim of the circle restlessly, his eyes on the night. There was no fire, so that the light would not blind us, and a deep chill settled into our bones. Ziri, Gerlund, and the bound duke, were all limned with shades of moonlight lying across the landscape of their features.

The duke woke as I made the circle and struggled against his bonds for a while. Ziri murmured to him softly, but he turned his head from her and she moved away. It was Gerlund and I that he fixed with stares of loathing and hatred. I could not help myself. I went to him.

"I'm sorry," I said, kneeling by his side. "I hope you can believe me."

His narrowed eyes said he did not.

"I believe saving your life to be a worthwhile thing," I said. "And I know of very few worthwhile things in this world. The Empress' plans for Alkire. Your future is within those plans, though I know not what they are." I glanced aside to where Ziri was pretending not to watch us.

"She would make a beautiful duchess, don't you think?" I whispered to him.

I never saw his response. At that moment the howling began, and we heard it even deep in the forest, and quick upon its heels came the screaming.

We listened to it for a very long time. In the echoes were the sounds of men dying horribly, the sounds of a pine fortress being ripped apart like twigs. Despite our work, we were still relatively close to the garrison, and in the strange way echoes will, some wended their way through the trees to us: the commands of desperate generals, the prayers of dying men, the calls to courage, the weeping of soldiers reduced to boyhood at the sight of what attacked them. They had, to that point, only seen some of the outrunners of the scourge-beasts, those sent to test their perimeters. What they saw then, as the true scourge swarmed over them like ants on a morsel of food, was beyond their comprehension. It was beyond mine as well.

The duke wriggled in his ropes, his eyes rolling back in his head, froth gathering at the edges of his lips, but my bonds held. Finally he curled in upon himself, and gave over to great sobs of constricted fury.

Ziri and Gerlund and I sat apart, did not speak to one another, and did not look at one another. It was a long time until the screams grew quiet. When they did, a silence descended on us that was heavy as stone. The normal night sounds of the forest disappeared, which was worrying. We wanted to believe we were safe, but we were not so foolish. At some point, Gerlund settled down on his heels, resting a bit. His sword tip touched the ground. But when we heard the crashing through the undergrowth, he rose again, fluid as a cat, and raised his weapon.

What came through the trees had once been a man – one of the duke's men. How the right side of his face had been ripped away and simultaneously cauterized with a fire, I could not imagine. How he got that far, how he found us, I will never know. His eyeball hung in its socket, and half his jaw was made of melted stubs of tooth. His tongue protruded out between them, lolling with no jaw to hold it in on that side. He drew up short at the sight of us. Then his gaze fell on the duke.

"My lorth?" he said, his tongue thick in the cheek that still had teeth, making a mess of his words. "My lorth? You are here??"

He stumbled forward.

"Fool," Gerlund said. "He has brought the damned thing right to us."

The soldier looked up at him uncomprehendingly, but Gerlund and I were looking beyond him. A long piece of the dark itself coiled toward him from the trees. The moon did not reflect upon it, and we could see it only as pieces of shadow darker than the night. It razored like the shimmering of a mirage, a vertiginous stretch of mist's opposite, the stench of rotting vegetation in its wake.

The soldier lurched forward even further, collapsing on his knees at the edge of our circle. At the same time, I heard from behind me the snap of rope. I turned to look.

The duke had freed himself with that last, incomprehensible strength of the desperate. He'd been working at the rope around his wrists with the sharp edge of a rock until it frayed enough that he could snap it, and he'd worked his feet enough to get one boot heel under the bonds around his ankles, breaking them as well. For a moment he stared at them, as astonished as I was.

Then I felt a sleeve whisper against mine, and turned back.

Ziri had gone to the edge of the circle. Reached out her hand to the soldier to draw him in. For one moment, her pale wrist and hand lay outside the circle's perimeter.

"Give me your hand," she said. "I can almost just reach you."

He reached forward, his fingertips met hers. I cried out. "No, Ziri!"

The dark of the Scourge slithered spider-quick up the soldier's legs, his torso, his arms, burrowed into his skull from behind and illuminated him with a void of light, just as Ziri's hand clasped his. The Scourge-dark slid, oily slick, down his arm and over her wrist, and she was wrenched forward like a straw doll, airborne for a moment so that she did not disturb the salt and silver. She grunted when she landed, sprawled on her stomach, completely outside our protective perimeter.

Gerlund bellowed and leapt outside the circle, bringing his sword down on the dark where it had hold of her wrist. It flashed through like metal through water, severing her hand. Ziri screamed. Gerlund froze, unable to comprehend what he had just done. He glanced back at me, his eyes wide with horror. I rose up.

The duke jumped on me from behind, bringing me down in the dirt and frost, yanking my arm back just before my fingertips could pass outside the circle.

Gerlund regained his senses, bellowed again, raised his sword, and a second, unseen tentacle of the Scourge thing rose up around his legs, jolting through his body and making him buck like an arrow-shot bird. He crumpled where he was, then further crumbled inward, an abandoned sack, emptied, and the dark retreated from him, disinterested.

Ziri screamed again, and I struggled against the duke, who had me firmly pinned within the circle.

"No!" he shouted. "She is gone, Hezal! By your own treachery you have lost her!"

She looked back at me, once. She looked back at me as the dark devoured her, swallowed her up, wrapped its folds around her, and dragged her body away into the dark, green, wet wood. Soon, too soon and not soon enough, her screams ended.

The Duke held me inside the circle until dawn, until I was too tired to fight him anymore, until the Scourge-dark drifted away with the morning mist after picking at the edge of my circle for hours. And because I hated him then for keeping me from rescuing Ziri, I whispered to him what Gerlund had revealed to me, but which I was not supposed to tell Rishar.

"It was your younger brother. The one you sought to protect, the one you poisoned your father for. He did this. He had you sent here. And you let her die, to keep yourself safe. So

much for your rightness, your sense of duty."

His grasp stiffened. "I thought to save you," he whispered, but he sounded uncertain. I lay in his arms for a long time, staring at the place where I had last seen Ziri, and near dawn began to wish I could take back what I had said.

We buried Gerlund and the soldier in small holes, as they had been rendered boneless pelts. I thought I would never see Ziri again, and cursed the Scourge-thing for leaving nothing but her severed hand for me to bury. But I was wrong. The Scourge do not eat everything they take. Years later, when I was destined to see her again, I would recognize Ziri only by her red, red hair.

The Duke of Alkire and I stumbled back out of the Scourgelands and across the desert of Boeotia to the protection of the Empress. I do not remember any of it, and we were nearly dead when we arrived. But only nearly. We lived, and he told me later it was because I found water in the cacti, and brought down lean desert hares to eat.

* * *

When I woke to find the Empress leaning over me, all my fantasies of a mother sifted away into the sands. Her face was round and bulbous. She was never pretty.

She had me moved into the library, and tended to me there herself. I heard her words, her explanations, as if they were a tide, sweeping in and out on the beaches of my consciousness.

No children.

Took in orphans, as she herself was taken in by an Empress before her.

Ziri and I were strong.

She did not send us to marry Ziri to Alkire.

But because one of us might live. There was another plague coming, and the Empress sought to put a salt and silver ring around the land – or as much of it as she might reach, but she was not long for this world. She showed me her kerchief, the one she coughed into, spattered with blood.

One day, when I was strong enough to sit at the table with the carved map, she placed the crown of empire over my head. It was so thick with jewels, my head bowed under it. She flashed a fleeting smile.

"It's heavy," she said. "It will never weigh less. But you will get stronger." Then her expression sobered.

"I did not come to see you before you left, because I did not think I could bear it if you did not come back. My two little dormice, sleeping outside my library door. Now, only one left. Only one little mouse." She shook her head sadly.

"I used to carve the names of those who died in my service on the back of my throne," she said, and laughed humorlessly. "It was rather stupid to think there would be enough room there. Now I write them here."

She set a book down before me. As she flipped through the pages I saw row upon row of names in a tiny, neat script. At the last page empty of ink, only one third of the way through the book, she stopped. She took up the quill, and scratched something on a scrap of parchment nearby.

"Here is her name," she said, and handed me the quill.

"I cannot write," I said.

"I know," she replied. "I will teach you. I will teach you that, and more. Begin with the 'z'."

She put her hand over mine and guided me as I wrote Ziri's name, the ink fastening to the parchment hungrily, the crown heavy on my brow. After Ziri's name, I made her show me how to write Gerlund's. That was the day I became Boeotia – became Empire – long before I would huddle within yet another circle of salt and silver in a wet, green clearing of the Scourgelands, and write Ziri's name in the book of the dead once again.

The End

M-press M. Thomas continues to be a force to be feared. She continues to raise an army of furry bunnies that, together with her invisible soldiers, will take over the known world. If she can just keep the bunnies from killing her own warriors... In her spare time, she can be found teaching in Austin, Texas. (This bio prepared by The Geek, who continues work on his forthcoming exposé on M. the M-press.)

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times in his career, that he had at last found what he was looking for, but it was too late in the day to hike past the barrier. He'd drive back to his hotel in Bonanza tonight. Maybe somebody there could unravel this particular little mystery for him and help him get to the other side.

The next morning Merrick descended the stairs from his room to the hotel's lobby. The hotel was old and seasoned like the proprietor, who hunched on a stool behind the front desk, a little gnome of a man, a clerk lost from a Dickens' novel. A credenza rose behind him, dark, polished wood with twenty darker cubbyholes for keys.

Merrick walked over to the desk. "Good morning, Lu," he offered and handed his key to the man. The Bonanza Hotel was old fashioned, like a western movie, holding the room keys for its patrons.

"Good morning, Professor," Lu answered, the same as he had every morning for the last three days. He carefully pushed the key into the dark mouth of number four and turned back as Merrick laid a pick ax, the head's iron ring twisted and broken from metal fatigue, on the gleaming desk top.

"Know anyone who can fix this?" Merrick asked.

Lu carefully picked up the tool so as not to scratch the wood and looked it over. Handing it back, he answered, "Carl at the filling station has a welder. You should try him."

Merrick smiled. "Thanks." He turned to go and then said, "You know the paved road that runs south of here toward the Barrier Canyons?"

"Sure."

"It's blocked at the bridge, but my map says it's supposed to be open. Know what the story is?"

"Stream washed out the road past the bridge a while back."

"Really. How long ago?"

Lu shrugged. "Dunno. Can't remember."

Merrick nodded and walked out under a sere, blue sky, a deep summer sky without any rain in it. A breeze threw swirls of dust along the main road with a windy freedom.

He saw Bonanza in a single glance: a decaying strip of town, the buildings old and worn; the asphalt street pitted with potholes and weeds poking through its many cracks. Beside the hotel was Rosalyn's Cafe and beyond that a tired church with cupped clapboard siding, white paint fading from the sun. Boarded up businesses lined either side of the street. At the edge of town, Carl's filling station loomed like a mirage, its antique gasoline pumps encrusted, their glass bowls cracked.

Merrick found Carl under a rusted pickup. He emerged holding a twisted leaf spring. "Morning," the young man said absently. "Can I help you?"

Merrick showed him the pick ax. "Can you fix this?" he asked.

Carl put down the spring and examined the twisted metal. "I can have it done in about an hour."

Merrick nodded. "Thanks. I'll be back after breakfast."

"Roz serves great huevos rancheros."

"She sure does. Say, do you know why the Barrier Canyon road is closed?"

"Bureau of Land Management turned the land into a natural prairie—no vehicles, no people allowed." Carl swatted a fly savagely. "Damn bureaucrats."

Merrick hid his surprise. That's odd, he thought. There's no prairie out there, only desert.

"You know when?" he asked.

Carl shook his head. "Little while before I came here, I guess."

"When was that?"

"Five years ago." The mechanic set aside the pick and peered under the car again. "Come back in an hour and I'll have that fixed good as new."

Merrick smiled. "Sure. I'll be back after breakfast."

Walking into town, the hairs on the back of his neck suddenly stood up. He slued around and saw Carl, holding the leaf spring, peering at him. He turned back to the truck when the professor spied him. Merrick stopped himself from asking the mechanic what was wrong. Small town folks—friendly but a little bit wary of strangers, he reasoned.

Rosalyn's Cafe was as old and timeworn as its geriatric owner. Cracked and peeling linoleum revealed painted floorboards beneath. Someone had patched the vinyl booths with silver duct tape, now nearly black from sweat and grime. More duct tape layered the four stools at the grease-tinted counter. An ancient Bunn coffee machine cradled two pyrex coffee pots, their brown plastic handles broken midway.

Merrick took a seat near the cash register, an antique device that sounded suspiciously like a Las Vegas one-armed bandit. At the other end of the counter, a man in faded dungarees and a sweat-stained baseball cap sipped coffee. In one of the booths sat another customer, his back turned to Merrick.

"The usual, Professor?" Roz asked, emerging from the kitchen, her voice weathered and cracked as the town itself.

Merrick nodded. Roz shouted his order into the kitchen, not bothering to write it down on a check.

She set a cup of coffee in front of him and pulled three half and half creamers out of her apron pocket to set along side it. "Find what yer looking for?"

Merrick shook his head. "Not yet. Got stymied yesterday by the blocked off bridge on Canyon Road."

Faded dungarees snorted and said, "That's been there twenty years, ever since the military took over the canyon for its Eee Tee research." Merrick looked at him blankly. "You know, UFO stuff," he explained, winking.

Roz rolled her eyes at the man. "You wouldn't know an alien from last month's laundry." She smiled at the Professor. "He thinks his dog works for the CIA."

The man scowled. "He's a smart dog."

"That dog sleeps all day and howls all night. Drives the whole town crazy."

"He howls in code," faded dungarees said defensively.

Roz ignored him. "If you ask me, Professor, the county government didn't want to spend the money to maintain the road anymore, so they closed it down. It's as simple as that." She left to fill another coffee cup.

The eggs came and Merrick dug in. He ate with gusto like a prize fighter. It had been twenty-five years since he fought in the amateur clubs and his hair was gray and thinning, but his body was still lean and strong from all the hiking and digging.

Ten minutes later, he spooned the last bit of cheese and hot sauce into his mouth and sighed. "That was great as usual, Roz." He held up his coffee cup for a refill. "Know any way to get by that barrier? I sure would like to explore the other side."

Roz filled his cup and said, "Ain't any other roads heading south. No way across the river that I know of."

Merrick smiled. "Guess I'll just have to walk in." He paid the bill and left. Behind him, the customer from the booth rose quickly and followed him outside.

"Professor!" the man called.

Merrick turned around and saw a young man striding toward him. He squinted against the sun reflected in the man's shoulder length hair, the long curls an unearthly white, the color of moonlight on snow. The man approached him grinning, perfect white teeth in a tanned, lean face. "It's the oil companies," he said.

"What?" Merrick replied.

"The oil companies bought the land around the Barrier Canyons. They put up the roadblock to keep tourists out."

"Oh." Merrick frowned and then grinned. "I'm an archaeologist. Perhaps they'll give me permission to look for Indian artifacts."

The man tugged at his lower lip thoughtfully and frowned. "Maybe they will or maybe they won't. Just askin' could take a long time and most likely they'd never get back to you." He scuffed the asphalt with a battered Nike running shoe. Then he smiled suddenly, a hint of conspiracy glinting in dark green eyes. "If you're determined to go, I know a better way." He slapped his hand against his blue jeans, ridding the palm of imaginary dust, and held it out. "Name's William Jefferson Roberts. Most folks around here call me Billy J."

Merrick pumped the hand once. "Conrad Merrick. You know a way around that barrier for my car, Billy J.?"

The young man grinned broadly. "Not your car...mountain bikes. Twenty-five dollars a day and I do the cookin'."

Overhead, the sun shone bleakly, beyond white, like pale ash. Dust devils battered harmlessly against the barricade behind them. It had been easy to hoist the mountain bikes, extra water and camping gear to the top of the concrete bulwark and then lower them to the other side.

"Where to now, Professor?" Billy J. asked.

From a pocket of his faded vest, Merrick pulled a crude map he had scribbled, based on notes that had accompanied the Olmec artifact. A sense of certainty flowed through him. Somewhere south of the bridge lay the 1926 dig that had unearthed the strange fragment of a jade carving. "Straight along this road for now. Ahead, two canyons, one cutting southwest and the other southeast, come together to form the beginning of a V. That's where we'll start."

They found the landmark at dusk—a stony apex that signaled the beginnings of two deep, rocky chasms that ran away into the fading light. A rock slide bled onto the road, blocking most of it but leaving just enough space for Merrick's SUV, had he been able to drive it there. In fact, the twenty miles of road they had covered on the bikes was smooth and clear—no wash out or damage from spring rains.

Pictographs overlaid the canyons' stone walls, murals of Native American rock art that twisted out of sight with the canyons' turnings. Billy J. laid out the sleeping bags and set up the camp stove while Merrick studied the pictures.

By the time dinner was ready, the only true light left was a band of blue shadow sliding swiftly behind the western mountains. Overhead, stars filled the dark void with a brightness and clarity unattainable in the city.

Billy J. found the Professor squatting beside a hissing gas lantern, examining a pair of

pictographs twice as tall as he was. One was a stretched human figure with stick arms bent at right angles to its rectangular body and two long horns protruding from a round head. The other was a bulbous circle with a cross in the center. A smaller circle, suggestive of a human head, rested on top and sprouted a single, enormous horn. "What you got there, Professor?" Billy J. asked.

"Anthropomorphs from the Fremont Culture," Merrick answered absently, lost in his thoughts. "It was contemporary with the Anasazi."

"Anasazi," Billy J. said. "I heard of them. They disappeared from around these parts hundreds of years ago."

Merrick nodded. "No one can explain for sure what happened to them. They just vanished after living here for several centuries."

"Like they walked right off the face of the earth," Billy J. said, awe in his voice. He squinted at the pictographs in the dark.

Merrick held the lantern aloft so Billy J. could get a better look at the grotesquely elongated figures. "The picture on the right represents a shaman, a kind of self-portrait, most likely. The one with the cross is the Sky God, Creator. Medicine Men would come here and craft these designs, hoping to create a portal that would take them to—a world beyond this one with visions of the future."

Billy J. whistled softly. After a few moments he said solemnly, "Open sesame." Nothing happened. He laughed. "Guess it ain't working."

Merrick smiled. "Not today, any..." A sudden spear of light pierced the night sky to their right. "What the hell?" he exclaimed, nearly dropping the lantern.

Billy J. laughed easily. He said indifferently, "Gas flare. Probably from an oil rig burning off the excess gas. Kind of startlin' the first time you see one. Lots of lights out here at night since the oil companies set up shop." He stretched and yawned. "Let's get some dinner and in the morning we can start explorin'."

He turned away and Merrick stared after him. The flash of light was too bright and thin to be a jet of gas from an oil rig, Merrick thought. It was more like a door had been opened quickly, throwing a sliver of brilliant afternoon sun into a pitch dark room, then hurriedly closed. Yet Billy J. squatted by the camp stove, spooning dinner onto metal plates, unconcerned about the light.

Merrick shivered slightly. The young guide was a mystery of sorts—youthful, energetic and smart; yet he stayed in Bonanza, a dying town with no future. Merrick realized he was holding his breath and let it out in a long, slow hiss. He chuckled ruefully. Getting spooked in your old age, he told himself and shrugged off his doubts. His right hand brushed against the bulge of the chamois sack and its jade, jaguar ear in his pants pocket next to his car keys. Safe for now. Soon he would have the answer to what he was looking for.

The next morning, Merrick woke with the sun. He stretched and pulled soft sheets up to his chin. No hurry today, he thought. Relax. Enjoy the last day of your vacation. Have breakfast at Roz's and then drive back to Salt Lake to drop off the SUV.

He took a long hot shower. Then he shaved carefully and packed his gear. As he reached for his pick ax, he peered at the recent weld and tried to recall something important—something he had intended to do today...yesterday? He couldn't remember. Another senior moment, he mused and chuckled. He shrugged and deftly lashed the pick to his pack.

At the desk he paid his bill and signed out. "Good-bye, Lu." He waved. The diminutive

clerk fluttered a cramped hand.

Next door at the cafe, Roz filled his coffee cup and set three creamers next to it. Merrick's eggs came moments later. He smiled and dug into the food with relish.

He finished. "Great as usual, Roz."

The door jingled and a young couple walked in. "Excuse me, Professor," Roz said and left to see the new customers.

"Can you fill our thermos?" the woman said.

"Sure." Roz took the thermos and returned in a few minutes with the coffee.

"That'll be three dollars," Roz said to the couple.

The man paid. "What happened to the road south of town?" the woman asked.

Merrick, sitting by the register, said, "Sorry, I couldn't help overhearing your question. The road crumbled a few years back and the county put up the barrier until it could be repaired."

The woman frowned. "Too bad. It appears to be a good area for fossil collecting." She turned to her companion. "You know, honey, maybe we could park by the barrier and climb over it. We could hike in a ways, maybe get lucky."

The man shrugged. "Sure. Let's do it." The couple left.

"Newlyweds," Merrick said.

"Yup," Roz said. "They'll walk a couple hundred feet past the barrier, find a stone and call it an adventure."

Merrick smiled. He handed Roz a twenty. She pulled the handle of the ancient cash register. With little pings, black numbers on white tabs appeared in the machine's window. While she counted out his change, Merrick watched a young man with long, unnaturally white hair walk up to the couple by their car. The man smiled at them.

Merrick left Roz a generous tip and walked out of the cafe to his SUV. As he fished his keys from his pocket, a chamois cloth bag came with them. He upended it into his palm but nothing fell out. It was empty. Strange, he thought, and again he felt as though something were missing. He could not think what it would be and shoved the pouch back into his pocket.

As he climbed into his SUV, he heard the young man say to the couple, "I can get you to the other side, no problem."

The End

Mark Reeder lives in Boulder, Colorado, where he works as a writer/researcher for Centre Communications, a company owned by Ron Meyer that produces educational films and DVDs. The two have been writing together for nearly ten years. Their other works include The Crystal Sword Series, 'A Dark kNight for the King' and 'Queen's kNight Gambit,' released by Publish America, and the non fiction book, 'Center: The Power of Aikido.' The have also collaborated on the award winning educational series, "Pioneers in America," and the 8-part PBS series, "The complete History of U. S. Wars." In his spare time, Mark searches for a cure to the lack of humor in the government. Ron lives in Louisville, Colorado, with his wife, Diane, and their daughter, Anna.

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as her face lit up and she ran to get a small basket. Before he could draw a breath she was back outside. "Ok," she said. "Let's go!"

It was actually called the Havenrook Forest, but to Jayel it was simply "the woods." Endgate lay on the far western edge of the forest, over a hundred leagues south of Kenatos on the Wayland road. Just on the border of civilized lands there were areas where its evil reputation was very well deserved. Even though it was safe enough near home, Jayel never went into the woods without his bow. He had heard too many stories about the beasts of the forest. There were nightwalkers, shambling beings that broke into old graves and tombs to eat the dead and any other carrion they could find. Helkurks were small, flighty fairies that tried to lure travelers with lights and sounds onto dangerous paths. Then there were the luplio, shaggy cat-like beasts that stood even with a grown man's shoulders. They were fearless, powerful killers who could down the mightiest prey with one swipe of their poisoned claws.

Jayel had seen the carcass of a luplio in the village once. Old man Watse's son had killed the beast, claiming it had taken seven arrows to finally bring it down. From the size of the beast, Jayel believed it. Today though, with the sun shining brightly and birds singing in the trees, it was difficult to picture any danger.

As they tramped down the path, he breathed in the crisp cool air. He really needed to get out here more, if only to check the stands of trees that his father had planted. They weaved their path towards the river, taking the long way to the stone oak. The largest tree he had ever seen, it towered over any other tree for leagues. His father had forbidden Jayel to ever cut the mighty tree down, and Jayel had faithfully obeyed the edict. The old man had been a hard taskmaster, but he had taught Jayel everything he could about the forest and working with wood. Father had always felt the stone oak was special, even sacred. Now that he was older, Jayel found that he felt the same.

Standing before it now, Jayel paused to study the old tree. Last week's windstorm had knocked down a few branches from other trees in the forest, but he was hopeful for something from the oak. He was not disappointed. A large branch lay below the tree, big enough for a piece of furniture, or even a chest. Once it had been properly seasoned, he could decorate it carefully and make more money from that one piece than all other work for a year.

Jayel studied the downed branch from every angle. It's going to take more than one trip, he thought as he bent down to look underneath.

"Jayel!"

"Just a minute," he said. She was always showing him some flower or bird. "It's probably another bluebird," he muttered under his breath.

"Jayel!" she called again, an edge of fear in her voice. He looked where she had been picking wild strawberries and saw her pointing off into the woods.

"What is…" he began. Then he saw it, a large shadow moving under the trees. Bracing his bow with one leg, he pulled the top down and in a deft motion had hooked the string, preparing it to shoot.

"Imoen, run over here!" Clutching her skirt tightly in her hands, she ran toward him, but Jayel's heart leapt to his throat as the beast came into the sunlight. It was huge, towering at least one and a half times a man's height, with shaggy brown fur and a ragged cloak tied loosely around its neck. Using one of its hands to steady itself, the creature somehow walked upright on legs that were curved like a dog's, moving over the rough ground with a rapid gait.

"Stay back," Jayel yelled, pulling an arrow back to his cheek. The beast roared in response, an odd sound almost like laughter. Taking deep breaths to try and calm his heart, he led the beast slightly and loosed his arrow. A miss! His hands shook as he pulled another arrow from his quiver and once again held it to his cheek. But the beast was already upon Imoen.

She screamed as the beast picked her up and threw her over its shoulder, her flailing arms and legs not even slowing it down as it turned and ran back deeper into the woods. Carefully, Jayel aimed for the creature's leg. Loosing the arrow, he whooped with excitement as the arrow struck true. However, his joy turned to dread as the monster pulled out the arrow and threw his head back in laughter. "You think you can hurt me, boy?" the beast roared. With a whirl of its cape, it turned and headed off deeper into the forest at a run with Imoen held tightly in its grasp.

The next few minutes were a blur to Jayel as he ran after them. But even his fastest pace was no match for the beast, and he quickly fell far behind. With his breath coming in ragged gasps, he stopped and fell to his knees. There was no way he could catch them on foot; he had to get a horse and help. Forcing himself to his feet, he turned up the path toward the village.

The branches slapped at his face, but he did not slacken his pace until he burst through the trees that surrounded the village. In moments he had crossed the village green and pounded on the Mayor's door, crying out for help.

It surprised Jayel how quickly horses had been saddled and men gathered, but the sun had scarcely moved before Jayel was riding hard with several others from the village, with the mayor leading the way.

"Let's go along the East Road, and see if it carried her through there," the mayor yelled. "If not, we can scout in the woods and try to find tracks."

"But he took her by the stone oak," Jayel complained.

"Lad, I'm not doubting ya," the mayor said, "but I've been through those woods a hundred times, and there is no lair of any beast. Besides, it talked to you. I'm thinking it's some man dressed in furs, a slaver perhaps. He'll want to get to a horse and be on his way."

They rode hard down the road and it didn't take long before they had passed the trail that led from the stone oak to the road. The trees on either side of the road cast strange shadows by the light of the late afternoon sun. They slowed down and watched the woods and the road for any sign of Imoen or her captor, only the "thump, thump, thump" of the horse's hooves breaking the silence. Jayel couldn't shake the feeling that something was out of place. The quiet was so oppressive that it seemed to Jayel not even the birds were singing. Wait. They weren't singing. He turned to the mayor and cried out, "There're no birds!"

The mayor looked up in surprise. "What…" he started, when with a rush, the creature exploded out of the bushes, Imoen bound and held over his shoulder. Jayel's horse reared up in fright and threw him out of the saddle. He landed hard on the ground and rolled to get up, scattering his arrows everywhere. "At him," the mayor cried as he drew his sword and charged the beast.

The beast dropped Imoen behind him, keeping himself between her and the villagers. Just when it seemed the mayor would run it down, it leapt up and with one swing of an arm swept the mayor out of the saddle, into the dust with a thud. Twang! Twang! Thunk! One arrow struck the beast in the arm, as others whistled close by. The beast paid no attention to the bowmen as he drew a long curved blade from his belt and started to advance toward the mayor, his lips curled back into a wicked grin.

Thunk! Another arrow hit the creature in the stomach. Jayel snatched an arrow from the dust, aimed and then released. It streaked toward the beast, and pierced it through the neck. His hope was quickly dashed when the creature snarled at him and deliberately took the arrows out of its neck and stomach, throwing them spitefully to the ground. "Stay back or I'll kill him and the girl," he growled, pointing his knife at the mayor who lay moaning on the ground. With that he took the knife between his teeth, scooped Imoen up in one motion, and then turned and bounded into the forest.

"I'm sorry, Jayel," the mayor said. "But I don't believe there is anything more we can do." He sat in an overstuffed chair in front of the fireplace, his arm in a sling while the doctor examined other cuts and bruises on him. "You saw what it did to our arrows, and it knocked me from my horse with one swipe. To go after it again would be suicide."

Jayel sat across from him on a couch, his head in his hands and cocoa and biscuits untouched on the table before him. "I have sent word back to Wayland, and Outriders will be arriving here in a few days. A Fyündular will probably arrive soon after that. I don't know what else we can do. We just don't have weapons that can pierce the beast's magic."

Jayel walked back to the cottage, his feet kicking at the dust with every step, betraying the emotions that were wound tightly inside him. Frustration and fear were slowly giving way to an irrepressible fury. He had been unable to help his sister, and now she was out there in the deepening gloom alone with the beast that had taken her. He walked out into the woods with the fading twilight. He had to go after her, but first he needed a way to stop the beast. The mayor might be able to wait for someone to come, but by the time they arrived the beast's trail would be cold and his sister far away.

As he stared out into the darkening woods, he wondered what he could do. His father had known the properties and abilities of all the plants in the forest, and had taught his son as much as he could, but when Jayel looked around him at every tree, he had never felt so helpless.

As the sun settled beyond the horizon, one last beam of light shot out and rested on the top of a yew tree. Jayel watched the branches shine brighter until the green leaves of the tree seemed to turn gold. After a moment, this last ray faded as the sun moved behind the mountains. There was something tickling at the back of his mind from a day long ago. His father was sharpening a blade and teaching him about the wood they would be working on that day.

"Every tree has a special ability, Jayel," he had told him. "Our door is made from ash, to prevent the walking dead from entering into our home. Elderberry wood is used for your flute, and the spirits of the trees listen as you play. The bark of the sassafras tree can make a tea to counter the effects of poison, and arrows made from yew can pierce through magic."

That was it! His skin prickled with excitement as he ran back to the seasoning shed behind the cottage. There were several boards of yew stacked to one side and he picked them up one at a time, slowly turning them over and feeling the oily texture. Finally, he settled on one and took it to the workshop. Jayel studied the wood and measured with care. There would be enough for five arrows, if he was careful. Turning the lamps up higher, he began his task.

He had never made arrows from yew before, but the springy wood presented no difficulty. It was deep into the night when he was finally finished. Five shafts lay on the table with their turkey feather fletching, tied twice around the top so his fingers could quickly recognize them in his quiver. Stifling a yawn with one hand, he turned the lamp down and prepared to go to bed.

He was too tired to go on tonight; the points would have to wait until morning.

He plopped down on the edge of his bed and let his arms lie loose, too tired to even take his boots off. Muscles ached from the day's events, and while he knew he needed to rest, he was too worried to relax. His thoughts were on Imoen and where she could be. He was about ready to force himself to get up and finish the arrow points when logic finally won him over. A few hours of sleep, and then he would make the points and be on his way by midday.

It seemed as though he had barely closed his eyes when he awoke. The sun was already coming in through the trees as he made breakfast, but it was still dark and gloomy in the cottage, matching his mood perfectly. He lit the candles in his mother's silver candlesticks, and they flickered warmly, their yellow light dancing across the whitewashed walls.

He walked back to the shop after cleaning up from breakfast, still holding the heavy candlesticks in his hands. He set one on the counter, and carefully wrapped the other in an old handkerchief and placed it in the back of a drawer. Picking up the remaining candlestick he held it in his hands for several minutes, letting his fingers caress the metal which his mother had cherished. Finally he could wait no longer and he placed it in the crucible and worked the bellows to get the forge to increase its heat.

He spent the rest of the morning melting the silver and preparing the arrowheads from his father's old molds. After sharpening and fixing each point to an arrow, he held each one in his hands and felt the balance. They were perfect.

After a hearty lunch, he grabbed his quiver and bow, strapped his hand axe to his belt, and took one last look around. With his preparations complete, he shouldered his pack and set off into the woods towards the last point he had seen his sister. Hang on Imoen, he thought, I'm coming.

Jayel jogged down the East Road, heading deeper into the forest. The restless energy that had built up during his preparations to go after Imoen was soon expended, and fatigue from the prior day's events combined with the lack of sleep caught up to him. His breath came in ragged gasps as his feet pounded the dirt, yet still he pushed onward. Imoen had been gone for over a day, and this thought drove him on. It was difficult to hold back the panic about what might happen to her, or even if she was still alive. He shook his head as he continued on. She had to be alive.

When he reached where they had fought the beast yesterday, he stopped and studied the dust for tracks. It didn't take long to find the trail, but the size of the tracks made him a little nervous. For a moment he wondered if he shouldn't wait for the Outriders. Standing at the head of the trail though, he seemed to feel his father there as well, urging him on. Taking courage, he grasped his bow tightly in his hands and began his pursuit.

Following the tracks was easy for Jayel. The path was well-beaten down and never seemed to vary as it wandered deeper into the woods, away from Endgate. Dusk approached as he came to where the beast had rested last night. Its tracks were everywhere and he uncovered a fire pit and places where they had slept. With the sun falling deeper behind the trees, he gathered some wood and built his own fire in the same pit. By the light of the fire, he then searched the entire area for more tracks.

The beast's prints were everywhere, but as he widened his search, he found that there were some booted tracks as well. He studied the two different tracks for several minutes, confused by what he was seeing. Following the beast's tracks some more, he discovered where

the creature had sat itself down upon a log. In the dust was the bare footprint of a man, and there also the boot tracks began. Jayel stared. The beast was a man. There was dark magic here that he did not understand, but when he felt the twice tied fletching of his yew and silver arrows, he felt comforted. Whether the beast was some sort of shape shifter, or a wizard turned slaver, he hoped the arrows would work. Still, his discovery made for a restless night's sleep.

He woke with the first hint of dawn and waited impatiently for more light to gather so he could search the area more closely. A short distance away he found a crude corral where a horse had been tethered. He looked into the dusty ground and studied the signs before him. The horse had been shod, but the left rear shoe was missing a nail, causing a distinct dimple in the dirt before him. With such a mark he knew he could follow the horse easily. The trouble now was how to keep up. After a mile the tracks reached the East Road once more, and they continued farther into the Forest and away from his village.

By mid-day he reached the end of the East Road where it ended in a T-intersection with the Outland road. Going right would bring him to the village of Bainbridge, which was sometimes referred to as the last bit of civilization for fifty leagues, although there were those that would argue about the civilization part. Going left would lead him back toward Havenrook. Jayel was not surprised to see the tracks turning right, and he trotted after them for several more miles.

Jayel had never been to Bainbridge before, and he stood in the road for a moment when it finally came into view. There were a dozen run down houses placed haphazardly around the small valley, which was dominated by a two story building that Jayel figured was the inn, judging by the drunks sleeping on the balcony and empty wooden kegs piled amidst garbage in the back. The only other building around was a large stable off the main road. Jayel headed there first, still following the dimpled tracks of the horse.

He had heard that folks here were strange, but nothing could have prepared him for the reception that he received just walking down the street. Mostly it was just some odd looks directed his way from the few trappers who were still sober enough to hurl insults at a newcomer. A couple of them though, seemed to think that he would be an easy mark for a free drink. "A bit lost, aren't ya boy?" one of them yelled to him. "Why don't you come over here and buy a drink for your long, lost pappy." Jayel kept his head down and walked a little faster towards the stable. It was tough to focus on the tracks and ignore the jeers that were directed his way, but the last thing he wanted was trouble. The horse that carried his sister and her kidnapper led straight to the stable. He walked inside the large building, hoping to see if the horse was still there.

"Hey you, get away from there!" Jayel turned to see a lean man walking towards him, a pitchfork held firmly with both hands. "I have enough to do without you coming in here causing problems."

"I, um… am sorry, but I'm looking for a friend's horse, and thought it might be in here."

"Looking for a friend? Boy, there isn't no horse of no friend of yours in here. Why don't you just beat it?" The stable hand came toward him, pointing the pitchfork menacingly, but Jayel ducked and ran out of the stable before he could get too close.

He didn't even give Jayel a chance to look around. It would be next to impossible to look for the horse with the stable hand there. He stopped and looked around. Well, if Imoen's kidnapper was still here in the village, he either lived here, was staying with a friend, or at the

inn. Since the inn would be easiest to check, he headed there first.

As he walked down the street, his feet brought up little clouds of dust with each step while sun beat down on him. Ahead a sign hung crookedly off the front porch of a dilapidated two story building. It still bore a faint outline of a bed, but the red lettering that had once announced the inn's name had long since become so chipped and faded that it was illegible. He walked up the wooden steps to the cracked and weathered door of the inn. It groaned as he pushed it open, and it took a moment for his eyes to adjust to the darkness. He was disappointed when they did. Several men sat around tables that looked as if they had been sanded down so many times, only a thin sliver of wood was left. A long wooden bar was to the left of the door with an opening to the kitchen beyond that. To his right a dark hallway went towards rooms with stairs also going to the upper floor. His stomach rumbled as smells of baked bread and fried chicken wafted over him. Well, it might not look like much, but the food sure did smell good.

"Can I get you something, boy?" Jayel turned and saw a man in a dirty apron and three days' growth of beard behind the bar, wiping out a glass with a cloth of questionable cleanliness.

"I'd like some lunch," he said, lifting his cloak to show his purse.

"Right then, have a seat here at the bar and we'll get something out to you." With that, the man disappeared into the kitchen, only to reappear moments later with a plate piled high with chicken, bread, and fried potatoes. Jayel started in eagerly, but he was unable to be rid of the hole in his stomach that reminded him that his sister could be right down the hall.

Jayel looked up from his plate periodically to try and study the others in the inn. They were a pretty rough-looking lot, most with bleary eyes and several layers of dirt. He sighed to himself. He was not going to find any help from this lot.

When he finished his meal, he pushed himself away from the bar and thought about his next step. He needed to know if his sister was here, and that need overrode his sense for caution. There was no one in the room that looked like they would help him, but when he saw the cook slaving away in the kitchen he decided to ask her.

She was an older woman with her hair rolled tightly into a bun. She glanced up at him as he came into the kitchen from the bar. Her apron was nearly spotless, and it stretched tightly over her plump figure as she stood carving up a chicken. Her brown eyes were wary as he approached her, however, and Jayel worried that she would call out if he did not say something soon. "Thank you for the food, it was delicious."

"A compliment from a young traveler? Those are rare enough these days," said the woman. "You must be new to the trail to give an inn's cook such a compliment." She set her carving knife down and looked at him sternly. "Or you want something. Come on, out with it, boy. What is it you want?"

Jayel felt his cheeks go hot and he struggled not to duck his head in embarrassment. Her callous tone took him by surprise, and he was hesitant to go on, but on an impulse he decided to take a chance. "I'm looking for a man who may be staying here. He would have arrived yesterday, and had a young girl with him."

"You mean Alric," said the cook. She did not sound surprised. "You had best watch yourself with that one, boy. He'll kill you if you look at him the wrong way."

"Where is he staying? Is he still here?"

"You are persistent, aren't you?" She looked at him closely, and seemed to see the bow and axe for the first time. "Whoever the girl is, you had best forget about her," she said, shaking her head. "Alric is a slaver, and a vicious man to boot. You can't just go in and try and take the

girl from him, because he'll go after her. If you try and stop him, he'd kill you without a second thought."

"What about the law?" asked Jayel. "Don't they know about him?"

"Whose law? Outriders? Wayland is a long ways from here, and the law will run you down just as soon as help you. Ain't no law here 'cept as a person brings himself." The cook stepped back from the hot stove for a moment and looked at Jayel. She studied his face and hands, and her eyes softened a little. "What are you doing chasing after Alric anyway? Wasn't there any men to go after the girl?"

"We tried to stop him, but it didn't do any good. The mayor was hurt and no one else will come now." Jayel sat down on a small stool. "I just can't run away." His heart was beating so hard he could hardly breathe. He had told the cook too much and it was time to take a chance. She already knew that he was after this Alric, and if she wanted to stop him, all she had to do was yell. However, something told him that she would not give him away.

He took a deep breath and launched into his story, letting the words spill out of him with all the emotion he felt. Frustration, fear, and anger boiled out with feelings so strong, that tears escaped his eyes and trailed down his cheeks. When he was finished, the cook looked at him for a moment, laying her finger to one side of her chin as she thought.

"I've heard of men that can do what Alric did, young man, but I never thought I'd have one here in this very inn. But even so, it would take more than knowing he's a beast-man for Jonas to kick him out. Paying customers are few around here, and Alric always pays in gold. Besides, Jonas has known he's a slaver and those young souls he brings through here have been taken from their homes, but he never says a word as long as the money keeps coming in."

"What did you mean, calling him a 'beast-man'? I thought he was some sort of wizard," Jayel said.

"Oh no," the cook replied. "He's not a wizard, those arrows you shot into him would have killed him then. No, he's one of the Midrash Baruch, descendants of evil druids who bred with fell demon creatures. They cannot be harmed with normal weapons, though I've heard that some Fyündular have killed them before. And of course the Outriders have their cold-forged swords. That would probably do the trick."

She turned and checked some bread dough that was rising on the table and punched it down with her fists. She worked for several minutes without saying a word, and then suddenly turned to Jayel and looked at him intently. "What would you do to get your sister back?"

"If I could sneak into her room when Alric isn't there, I could steal her away and we'd be gone before he knew it."

"The two of you on foot wouldn't stand a chance running from a man on horseback and you know it, especially with such a short head start. You'd have to have a horse of your own." She sighed and looked away through a window. "Well, if it's a horse you need, I guess I could help you there. Jonas has a fine bay in the barn behind the inn. She could carry the two of you easily enough. Mind you, if you get caught, I won't let on that I knew anything about you."

Jayel's hopes soared. On a horse they could make it back to Endgate in hours, and could wait there for Outriders to come and capture Alric. He stood and headed for the door, but then paused as he puzzled over her generosity. "Why would you help us?"

"Because I was a sister once too."

Jayel left the kitchen through the back door and headed toward the inn's small barn

through a narrow alley. Fear clutched his heart and his eyes glanced everywhere for Alric, afraid he might be recognized if the monster saw him. When he entered the barn, he saw the bay right away. She was a big horse, with a broad back and strong and powerful legs. Saddles and other tack hung on the wall, and he figured he could get the horse saddled and ready in five minutes. Jayel reached up and patted the horse on the nose, and took out a lump of sugar the old cook had given him for a horse treat. The bay would do nicely. Now he just had to find a way to sneak Imoen out of her room.

He left the stable and started towards the inn, deep in thought on his plans. When he entered the alley, he caught movement out of the corner of his eye. As he turned to look, he felt a sharp pain in the back of his head and his legs seemed to stop working, causing him to fall to the ground. That's odd, he thought, and then remembered no more.

His head hurt. It throbbed and ached like someone had pounded a nail into his skull and they were trying to pull it out again. Eventually the pain drove sleep from him. Jayel struggled to sit up, and blinked his eyes a few times to try and bring things into focus. He was in a narrow bed that took up one entire wall of a small bedroom that he could cross in a couple of steps. Somehow a dresser and a desk had been crammed next to the bed, and only a small window let in any light. A pitcher of water sat on the desk, along with a glass and a plate covered with a cloth napkin. He looked at the plate as his stomach started to growl. Jayel wasn't too sure how long it had been since he had last eaten, and something under the plate smelled like bacon.

With that realization, all sleepiness departed. He pulled away the cloth and found a few pieces of blackened bacon along with a thick slice of bread with a pat of butter. With the first bite, his hunger came on strong, and he wolfed the food down.

With breakfast out of the way, at least he had decided it was breakfast, he started to think about where he was at and what to do next. His clothes were lying on the chair and the rest of his things had been set on the floor. He stood and started to dress, but had to place his hand on the wall to keep from falling when he grew too dizzy. This must be the cook's room, he decided, as no one else would have been so kind. Lifting his quiver, he was relieved to find his yew arrows still there. In fact, a quick inventory revealed the only thing missing was his money purse. Someone had hit his head hard for a few coins, barely enough to buy a meal or two.

He reached up and felt a bandage on his head. When he pulled it away and opened it, he found a poultice made from burnet leaves, as well as a great deal of dried blood. He filled the basin with water from the pitcher and cleaned his wound, amazed at all the dried blood that was evident. He must have been hit harder than he thought.

Gathering his belongings, he opened the door and found that it led directly to the kitchen. The cook was there preparing cold meat sandwiches to sell to travelers before they left. She glanced up when Jayel came in, wiped her hands on her apron, and looked at him closely.

"Come here, boy," she said. "Let's take another look at that knock you've got on your head."

As she examined him, he really seemed to see her for the first time. Her wrinkled pale skin showed evidence of not enough sun, and her gray hair was tucked loosely behind a yellow kerchief. She was old enough to be his grandmother, but it was her eyes that showed her years the clearest. They were a deep brown and had a faint, tired look to them. Still, her grip was strong as she took his head firmly in her hands and pulled him down to her for a close inspection.

"It looks like your wound stopped bleeding and everything seems to have sealed up tight." She forced his head so he was facing her. "Are you having any headache?"

"Not anymore, just soreness is all."

"Well, it looks like you've done your healing well. I'm just glad that you're doing fine." She took her hands from his head and started to turn to her work once more, but he grabbed her hands and held them tightly.

"Thank you," he said. "Thank you for all of your kindness."

The old cook looked at him wide eyed for a moment, and then tears came to her eyes. "Now look what you've done. I haven't blubbered in years, and you had to go and burst the dam." She smiled at him. "I am glad that I was able to help," she said. "Now you've got to go and get your sister, but you won't be able to take the horse now. When you were attacked back there, Jonas thought you were out to steal his horse, but I convinced him that you probably stopped the thieves."

"I can still try and sneak Imoen out of her room though," Jayel said. "Maybe if we get a big enough head start we can make it back to Endgate before Alric catches up, especially if we can hide in the Forest."

"I'm sorry, boy, but Alric left yesterday eve with your sister. Started out of here like he had someone after him. 'Course knowin' Alric he probably did."

"Yesterday evening? But they could be miles from here!"

"Now, boy, you were in no condition to travel last night, even if I had been able to wake you. Besides, Alric would not go far at night. No one likes to travel far in the Forest after dark, especially with a horse that could go lame on some unseen rock. I imagine he just traveled a few miles up the road, found a place to hole down, and stayed the night out there. As it is, you had a good night sleep, and I packed some things for your journey." She pulled a large sack out from behind a counter and handed it to him.

"What's this?" he asked, opening it to see what she had placed inside. There was a loaf of bread, a good-sized wedge of cheese, a tightly wrapped bag containing a dried fruit and nut mixture, several apples, and a cold meat sandwich. "This is too much," Jayel protested. "I don't even have any money to pay for any of this."

"The only payment I want is for you to come back with your sister." The old cook paused, a worried look on her face, and she turned to Jayel with eyes tight with fear. "I have a question for you, boy. What are you going to do when you meet Alric? You have a bow and fool's courage. I've already told you he must be Midrash Baruch, and your weapons can't hurt him."

"I'm hoping that I have taken care of that problem," he said, pulling one of the arrows he made to rescue his sister out of the quiver.

"An arrow? I don't understand."

"When Alric took Imoen, I hit him in the leg with an arrow but he just pulled it out. Later, men from my village were with me when we caught him again and he was hit with wounds that would have killed any other man, yet he just shrugged them off." Jayel shuddered with the memory of that fight. "I had never heard of Midrash Baruch. All I know is that he must have some magic protecting him, so I made arrows to pierce through it."

The cook looked at him closely, her eyes unreadable. "You don't know if it will even work, do you?"

Jayel shrugged, "I guess not, but it's the only chance I've got."

"But you're still going through with all this? Both you and your sister could end up killed."

"There isn't anything else to do. If I don't follow her, she'll be gone forever. I just have to hope that another chance to rescue her will come."

Jayel left Bainbridge and started up the road once more, his eyes eagerly scanning the dirt for any sign of the dimpled horseshoe. Few travelers had left the village since Alric the night before, but there was no sign of Alric's horse for over a hundred yards. He was about to go back to the stables to try and pick up the sign from there, when he found what he had been looking for.

Alric had led the horse into the woods beside the trail for some ways past the village. As Jayel studied the signs, he saw that Alric had waited to see if he had been followed. Jayel looked at the tracks for sometime, and finally realized something that he had been missing all along. Alric had never made any effort to hide his trail. At first, Jayel had thought it was because he was in a hurry, but the time he had spent at the inn proved that to be false. Now, Jayel saw how he ran when he was frightened, again not trying to cover his trail, but keeping off the road to try and surprise pursuit. "He has no woodcraft," Jayel said out loud. He rubbed his sore scalp as hope for Imoen filled his breast. If he could rescue her and escape into the woods, it was doubtful that Alric could ever find them.

With fresh energy in his heart, Jayel began to jog deeper into the woods, each step leaving civilization farther behind. All day long he traveled, at times running harder as if to try and match the pace of the horse, easily following the dimpled hoof prints in the dusty road.

Jayel had grown up with stories about the dangers of the Havenrook Forest, but it was difficult to relate them to the area around his home. Those woods, after all, were like his garden. Here, past Bainbridge, however, he understood where the stories had come from. The trees were starting to grow closer together, and the air seemed warmer, more humid. It made it much more difficult to breathe as he jogged on.

All through the day he pursued his quarry, not even stopping to eat, instead pulling food out of his pack as he continued. By mid afternoon however, it was apparent that he was slowly losing ground to Alric and Imoen. No matter how hard he pushed himself, the horse was slowly pulling farther ahead.

He pondered the problem as he ran after them. Stopping for the night might cause him to fall too far behind. If he followed the trail at night though, he might miss a sign that they had turned off the trail. That was, unless he had a torch to light the way, but a torch might attract trouble. It was going to be a calculated risk either way. In the end he decided to travel through the night. By tomorrow he would need to catch Alric, otherwise he would need to rest.

He wolfed down a quick dinner and gathered birch bark sheets for torches as the last signs of the day faded. He rolled the bark sheets into cones and tied them together with wild strawberry vines, and then lit his first torch and started on his way. As he traveled on the road, he could see the signs of the dimpled horseshoe clearly in the dry, dusty dirt.

The forest was still and dark as he walked, and he took to whistling softly to himself to try to drive away the stifling silence. Moths flew about his torch, attracted by the light. One came too close and its wing was singed. Twirling around, it plummeted to the earth and fluttered weakly on the ground before it stopped altogether. Jayel stopped to stare at the insect for a moment. The moth hadn't meant to die but had simply come too close to the flame. In a way, he felt a little like the moth. He was being pulled closer and closer to his sister. But what if the reward he sought would instead take his life as well?

He paused and peered into the forest around him. The trouble with traveling at night was that he had no way of knowing when he was close to Alric and his sister. It wouldn't do any good just to catch up to them and be discovered by Alric. No, that wouldn't be good at all. He took a

few more nervous steps, but the feeling that he was being watched was making the hairs on the back of his neck stand on end.

In the woods beyond him a stick cracked with a loud snap. He plunged the torch into the dirt and rolled it around to douse it. The night descended into blackness as the moon and stars did little to penetrate the thick leaves of the trees that surrounded him. He moved over to the other side of the trail, pulling a hunting arrow out and readying his bow as he knelt in the brush. He studied the woods, but try as he might, he couldn't see anything other than vague shadows that seemed to drift across the landscape. His night vision had yet to return. Rising into a crouch, he readied his bow while trying to determine what was out there.

He realized it had been foolish to use a torch. All it had done was attract the attention of everything in the forest. They were attracted to the flame, just as the moth had been. If he had not heard the stick break in the woods, he might have been taken completely unaware. It wasn't much better than it was now though. He was crouched next to a thorny bush on a dark night, trying to keep his bow at the ready while something was out there in the darkness.

He reached out into the night, trying to discern danger from the slightest noise or smell. It seemed that he could hear something whispering in the darkness. He turned his head to where the whispering seemed to be, his heart pounding so loud in his ears he was amazed that he could hear anything at all.

After a few moments the whispering came in stronger, and Jayel realized that it was not whispering, but sniffing. A large shadow started to loom out of the forest, its huge shaggy head revealing the creature for what it was. A luplio. He nocked the arrow and drew slowly back. It was time to make some luck.

With one motion he stood and fired his arrow. The luplio let out a roar as it spotted him, but its triumph turned to pain as the arrow grazed the beast along its back. Blood pounded in Jayel's ears and his breath came in ragged gasps as he grabbed another hunting arrow from his quiver. His hands were shaking as he desperately pulled the arrow back to his cheek. He focused on the charging, shaggy form coming closer, held his breath for a moment, then released. The arrow flew straight, and struck the luplio again, this time on its great shoulder. The creature yelled a shock of pain, but it did not slow its pace. Jayel flung down his bow and drew out his axe and knife as the beast fell upon him.

The force of the impact knocked him back. He staggered and tried to stay on his feet. Desperately slashing with his knife, he managed to keep the creature at bay while he tried to regain his balance. The creature slowly circled him, and Jayel struggled to keep his footing steady on the rocky ground. With a roar the beast charged once more, swinging wildly with its claws. Jayel grunted in pain as one of the beast's claws struck him across the ribs, and he desperately swung his axe up to force the luplio back. The blade caught the beast in the fore leg, slicing through the muscle. The luplio roared in pain and staggered back, blood streaming from its wound.

Jayel raised his axe and screamed in rage at the beast. His anger combined with his fear, and he seemed to lose the ability to think clearly for a moment. All he knew was that this creature was stopping him from reaching Imoen. With a guttural roar he charged at the beast, swinging his axe fiercely from side to side. The luplio took one look at him and fled back through the forest, limping into the darkness to lick its wounds.

Jayel screamed into the night, a whoop to celebrate his victory. The joy soon turned to dread though, as he noticed the burning pain in his chest. The luplio's claws had struck deeply,

and its poison was starting to affect him. Already it was difficult to stop yawning. In a few moments he would start losing his ability to focus, and would be dead unless he stopped the poison's flow.

He ripped open his pack and poured everything onto the ground, frantically searching for the antidote, sassafras tea. He couldn't stop his hands from shaking as he sank to the ground and gathered together a few twigs and dry brush. With his knife he dug a small hole in the dirt, and threw the tinder into it. In moments he had directed a spark to the tinder, and he softly but steadily blew it to flame.

His mind screamed at him to hurry, but if he was to have any chance at all he needed to do things right the first time. Otherwise he might pass out and die from the poison before he'd have a chance to do it again. He forced himself to stand as soon as he had a small fire burning, and emptied his leather water bag into the cooking pot. He threw the sassafras tea into the water. Jayel forced himself to not close his eyes as he waited for the water to bubble and the medicine he needed was leached from the tea. His father had taught him that he needed to bring the water to a full boil, but Jayel pulled the pot from the fire the moment a few bubbles appeared.

With quivering breath he blew on the steaming tea to try and cool it down. Finally, with his eyes growing too heavy to wait any longer, he gave up trying to cool the tea and gulped it down, scalding his tongue and throat. He forced himself to drink it all, and then lay back as sleep claimed him.

There were birds singing. Jayel couldn't see them. For some reason his eyes wouldn't open, but he definitely heard birds. He weakly pulled himself up on one elbow and tried to force his eyelids open. Tiny slivers of blurry, green light seeped through. One blink, then another, and over and over again as gradually the trees and bushes that surrounded him started to come into focus. He gazed at the remains of his fire. The fire had burned out long ago, and now only a thin white crust of powdery ash remained under his blackened water pot.

It hurt to breathe. With his fingers he gingerly pressed upon each rib, grimacing as it seemed each one ached. His shirt and jacket were torn where the luplio's claws had struck, and were stuck to his chest by the dried, crusty blood. He briefly started to pry his shirt loose off his skin, but stopped when the scabs over the wounds started to tear. It would be best just to leave it alone. Besides, he had no water to wash with. Hopefully it would work loose on its own, and with a little luck, it wouldn't start bleeding again.

He sat up slowly, wincing every time his shirt tore at his skin when it pulled the wrong way. He was pretty sure he had some cracked ribs, and the combination of the pain from the dried blood and the pain from breathing forced him to move carefully. Slowly, he made his way to his knees, and after a moment to rest, he rose to his feet. His legs shook like a newborn colt's, and he had to steady himself by placing his hand on an elm. When a spasm of coughing broke over him, he had a difficult time deciding which hurt him more, his chest or his throat. Apparently the tea had been far hotter than he remembered.

He spent the rest of the morning munching on apple slices and taking stock of his situation. With each swallow, his throat stung from where he had scalded it the night before. Water, he decided, was his first concern. In his fevered state he had poured all of his water out in an attempt to fill the pot, and the leather bag was now as empty as a beggar's purse. There were several small streams in the forest, but he had no idea when he might see one. It was going to be a dry morning.

Despite his dire circumstances, Jayel's spirits were high. He had fought off a luplio and won! True, he had been wounded, and even poisoned; but he had stopped the poison, and he could feel his strength returning, even his ribs didn't seem to hurt as much.

In spite of his sister being carried farther and farther away while he had slept, he felt a new confidence. Underneath the old elm, a boy whose shoulders had been borne down prematurely by responsibility began to rise up firmer. He had faced death and won. There were miles to go and other challenges to face to win back his sister, but Jayel felt his doubts at rescuing her fading farther away.

It was late afternoon when he came to the trading post called The Garrick. Not really a town, it was simply a large tavern with a stable, a few ramshackle houses, and of course, the trading post itself. Jayel thought about following the tracks into town, but the combination of the stench of unwashed bodies and the knowledge that this place was likely filled with cutthroats and thieves encouraged him to move off the road and out of sight. Two days ago he had walked blindly into a town and ended up finding a friend. But he had also been hit over the head and had his money stolen. The second event was far more likely here.

It was difficult to stay hidden as he moved around the town, since it seemed that some people had just decided to build a house where it suited them. It resulted in a patchwork, haphazard feeling that probably was not unlike the chaotic life these villagers likely led. The sun was starting to set by the time he had completely circled around the village. Once he had put The Garrick out of sight, he studied the road for signs of his quarry. In moments he had the trail once more and started on his way.

He hadn't followed the trail more than a few hundred feet when he found another set of the dimpled hoof prints, this time heading back towards The Garrick. Jayel studied the road closely and soon found several sets of tracks, not only in the dust but in dried mud as well. Apparently the man had passed this way many times. It all led to only one answer. The Midrash Baruch must live around here.

The possibility of being so close to his quarry gave Jayel an extra burst of energy, and he had to force himself to stay at a jog despite his aching ribs and sore muscles. The deepening shadows made it a little more difficult to follow the trail, but Jayel was too excited to slow down now. It wasn't long before he found where the tracks left the road. It was a narrow trail, less than five feet wide that led into the woods. A quick examination was all he needed to find plenty of dimpled horseshoe prints. It was Alric's horse.

Jayel walked up the trail, his ears straining to hear any sound while he peered into the shadowy woods. Willow trees lined the trail, and he noted that they had been carefully groomed and planted close together. That made Jayel uncomfortable, and not just from the closed feeling the trees created. Evil creatures favored willows, especially since they represented change. To a Midrash Baruch who could change his own shape, willows would be a totem tree. Jayel remembered the moth that had burned in his torch with a shudder, and worried that he was also being drawn into a snare.

On an impulse, he stepped off the trail and into the woods. It was difficult to make his way through the thick underbrush, but he didn't want to chance being discovered by Alric. The ground felt soft and springy, and he figured there must be water nearby for the willows. Judging from the mosquitoes that swarmed around him, it must be very close. He slapped away at them, but for every one he killed a dozen more were there trying to get at any exposed flesh.

As he struggled on through the twilight, he could hear the faint sound of voices in the distance. Jayel paused and strained to make out any words, but it was just too faint. Countless fears about Imoen began to bubble to the surface of his mind, and he hurried along as best he could, ignoring the branches that sometimes slapped at his face.

Jayel stayed next to the path and under cover as he continued to move forward. Periodically, he could hear the voices in the distance. At times, words would come through, not enough to make sense about what was being said, but loud enough to tell that someone was angry.

He reached the crest of a hill as stars appeared in the evening sky and the moon shone down on the scene before him. A two-story stone house and an old barn were set in the middle of a small valley. The windows of the house were all dark except for one on the second floor, but the barn doors were wide open and light spilled out of it, into the darkness. Jayel could clearly see someone saddling a horse in the barn, while another man, one much larger, stood watching.

Jayel studied the scene before him, and decided that the larger man must be Alric. He had never seen him as a man before, but with him only a couple hundred feet away he was able to get a good long look. His long shaggy hair was pulled back into a ponytail that hung down the middle of his back, while his bushy beard pointed out in all directions. Crouching down even further next to a blackberry bush, Jayel seemed to feel the power and anger that Alric emanated. Seeing him there reminded Jayel of his quest and what it might cost. He felt fear come stealing back into his heart.

For a long moment Jayel stayed there, too scared to even move, until at last Alric mounted the horse, and rode hard up the trail, right where Jayel was hiding. Before he even had a chance to react the horse thundered by and was gone again toward the main road. Jayel peered back toward the barn and saw that the other man had shut the barn doors and was walking back to the house, appearing only as a shadow against the ground.

He watched intently as the man entered the house and windows started to glow from lights. Jayel knew that if he was going to act, it needed to be now. The stone house was nearly one hundred yards away across the meadow, but he doubted that he would be seen in the dark.

Holding his bow tight, he stepped down the hill and started to run toward the house. He stumbled occasionally in the dark over the uneven ground, but in moments he reached the walls of the house and stood there panting. When his breathing slowed, he moved around the house, peering in at every window.

It only took two windows to find the man from the stables. He was in the kitchen, cutting some vegetables at a counter. His linen shirt was so stained that Jayel could only guess at the original color. Periodically, the man would pause, take a long puff from his pipe and scratch at his short beard before he would resume chopping vegetables.

The rest of the windows revealed nothing on the ground floor, and looking up into the second story, there was still only the one window that had light. He wondered if that was where Imoen was. He crept back to the front door, and slowly turned the handle. With a soft click, he opened the door and stepped inside. Red overstuffed couches sat against the walls, and a thick shag carpet was in the middle of the room. An open doorway was on the left of the room, and a hall at the back that led to the rest of the house.

Jayel moved to the left and sneaked a glance around the opening and into the kitchen. The man was still there at a counter, continuing to chop vegetables, the thick, pungent smell of curry permeating the room. Slowly Jayel pulled his axe from its belt, and twisted it so the blunt

side was down. Stepping lightly on his toes, he entered the room and moved toward the cook. He was almost in striking range when he saw the man stiffen and start to turn. The window. He had seen Jayel's reflection. With a shout Jayel leapt at the man, bringing the blunt side of his axe down onto his head.

The man crumpled to the ground with a moan and didn't move. Jayel paused for a moment to check if the man was still breathing, and heard ragged breaths. Then with his axe in his hand, he ran down the hall and up the stairs, taking them two at a time. At the end of a long hallway there was a single door with light coming from under it. A heavy bolt was drawn across it. He pounded on the door. "Imoen! Are you there?"

"Jayel?" he heard a soft voice call from inside the room. "Oh Jayel, is it really you?"

He drew back the bolt and threw the door open, only to be knocked back as his sister flung herself at him. Her clothes were bedraggled, her hair in tangles, and her eyes were swollen from crying; but she looked wonderful to him.

He held her tight for a few moments and then pulled back and looked closely at her. "Can you travel? We've got to go. I saw Alric leave a few minutes ago and we need to get away from here."

Imoen's eyes widened. "Alric? He never told me his name. He would just tell me how much people would pay to have me." Imoen slumped against the doorframe. " Oh Jayel, we must get away. I'll never let him catch me again. I'd sooner die."

He took his sister's spare clothes from his pack, and had her dress while he stopped by the kitchen. The man Jayel had struck still hadn't stirred, and there was a small pool of blood that was starting to form by his ear. He felt a pang of guilt. He did not want to kill the man. He didn't really want to kill anyone. Taking the rag that the man had been using, Jayel dipped it in a bucket of water and wiped away blood from the man's scalp. There was a large knot where Jayel had hit him, but it looked like the wound was really not that severe. At least, he hoped it was so.

He forced himself to leave the man and started to rummage through cupboards, filling his pack with bread, jerked meat, and a jar of apple cider. Imoen stood in the doorway before he was finished, her blue traveling cloak wrapped around her to ward away an inward chill. "Let's just go, Jayel. Please? Let's go home."

Jayel looked at Imoen and could see the fatigue in her eyes. She had been a captive of the monster now for over four days, and it did not look like she had slept at all. Despite her pleading, he knew they would not be able to outrun a man on a horse, especially if Alric came back soon. They needed a mount of their own.

A quick inspection of the barn was fruitless. No other animal was there. "We'll have to head to the woods," he decided, "try to lose him there." Imoen only nodded, but her eyes shone with fear as she realized they still had a long way to go to be safe.

They jogged across the meadow until they reached the shelter of the willow trees, and then followed a line of low hills. Jayel figured their path should take them to the main caravan track on the other side of The Garrick. As they stumbled about in the dark, though, he knew that they really couldn't go too far tonight.

While they walked, he listened to Imoen relate her ordeal. She spoke of how Alric would terrify her, threaten her with stories of how she would be sold as a slave, never to return. Sories of cruel owners and how she might be treated. Alric had seemed to delight in her misery, and her tears only brought laughter to him. Hearing her experiences filled Jayel with strength and resolve to make sure Imoen would never need to fear that monster again.

They spent the night without a fire in a small hollow under a sassafras tree. Deep in the Havenrook Forest, the last thing Jayel wanted was to attract attention from the beasts of the woods, not to mention Alric. So in the dark they munched on some bread and dried meat, and washed away the meal with water. The night was silent, and their whispers seemed to resonate through the trees.

"Jayel, what will we do if Alric catches up to us?" Imoen asked him. "Your arrows didn't stop him before."

Jayel pulled out one of the yew arrows from his quiver and showed it to his sister. "I made this for you. It's filled with magic to pierce through Alric. It's also filled with a brother's love. I swear, Imoen, he will never get you again. Now go to sleep. We're going to be traveling hard tomorrow."

After a while her soft breathing started to lull him into sleep. He tried to stay awake as long as he could, but eventually his weariness won and he closed his eyes.

The sun was already high into the sky when Jayel awoke with a start. A blue jay was chattering above him, and a breeze was causing the trees to sway back and forth slowly. It was a bright morning and the forest seemed at peace with itself. Jayel, however, was horrified. They were only a few miles away from Alric's stone house, and it was already mid morning. He reached over and shook Imoen gently, calling her by name. "Imoen, we need to leave now!" Jayel heard his own voice, taut with fear, and took a deep breath to try and calm his emotions.

"What happened?" Imoen asked him. "Why did you wake me so late?"

"I fell asleep," he admitted. Worry rumbled in his stomach, and he rummaged through his pack for some food to eat on their way. He stepped outside the small hollow of the tree and looked carefully in each direction. There was no sign of Alric or any other danger, but that did not mean that he wouldn't be far behind. He recalled with terror how fast Alric had been able to run away as the beast, even while carrying a struggling Imoen. They had to get out of there.

Jayel pushed himself and his sister hard through the day, only stopping briefly at noon, to refill their water bag from another of the forest's many springs. Jayel's wounds had healed nicely, but he was still sore from the attack by the luplio and being hit in the head. Imoen seemed to be more emotionally tired than physically, but the fear of being caught by Alric again pushed her on.

They reached the road by mid afternoon, and for a moment Jayel wondered if they should even use it. The old caravan track represented a quicker path home, but if Alric was riding his horse and came upon them, they would have little time to hide in the woods. On the road though, they wouldn't have to worry as much about a luplio or other beasts. Each choice carried risks, and there was no sure way to go. In the end, he chose the road. If they kept their ears open, they should be able to hear a horse long before it appeared.

It was easier to jog along the road, but Jayel couldn't shake the feeling they were right in the open. Thick woods on either side just enhanced the feeling that at any moment Alric was going to rush out at them. Each time they approached a slight rise in the road Jayel worried that Alric was down on the other side, hiding out of sight. His nerves became so tense that he wasn't sure how much longer he could go on. In the end, though, it was his ribs that decided when it was time to stop for the night. He was still very sore from being attacked by the luplio, and by early evening he was unable to go on. They left the road and made a camp several hundred yards into the woods on the other side of a large boulder. Again with no fire, the night passed fitfully

as Jayel woke up several times for fear of sleeping past the dawn. Finally, when there was just a hint of dawn on the horizon, he gave up on sleeping, woke Imoen, and they started once more.

The second day since he had rescued Imoen passed quickly as they continued on the track towards Bainbridge. They talked of home and escape. The idea that they were only one more day away excited him more than yesterday's nervousness. There had been no sign of Alric. Maybe he had given up and wasn't after them, or maybe he believed Imoen was rescued by an Outrider. Jayel knew that Alric was no tracker. Maybe he had lost them in the forest. Those thoughts lightened their hearts, and with each step they became more convinced that they were free.

It was almost dusk when they reached the outskirts of the village of Bainbridge. Circling around the town, Jayel led Imoen to the inn. They crept up the back stairs and opened the door to the kitchen.

The old cook stood at the counter, kneading a large pile of dough. She glanced up when the door opened. "What do you…" she began, but then stopped as she saw who it was. Her eyes opened wide and she put her hand to her mouth. "You! I can't believe… Oh, come here, both of you."

Jayel and Imoen rushed over to her open arms, as she hugged them with her flour-covered hands. "I can't believe you've made it here."

"I told you that we'd make it," Jayel said. "We just thought we'd stop by and see if we could stay here tonight."

The cook pulled back and looked at Jayel with wide eyes. "Oh no, you can't do that."

"Why?" Jayel asked. "Has Alric come this way?"

"He's here right now, boy," she said. Imoen started to whimper at the news, but the cook took her firmly by the shoulder, looked her in the eyes, "Look, young lady," she said. "I don't mean for him to have you, and I'm going to help the two of you on your way. So you just calm down."

"When did he get here?"

The cook leaned against the counter and laid one finger against her chin as she spoke. "Oh, he arrived early this morning. Looked as if he had been riding all night. First thing he does is take a look all around town, and then he went off into the woods for a couple of hours. He came back around noon, and set himself up in the inn."

"We can't stay here," Jayel said. "Help us get back out into the woods."

"Just hold on a moment. I can help the two of you, sure enough, but you don't dare leave the inn until it gets a little darker out there." She moved over toward a small closet and opened the door. "Why don't the two of you just sit over there behind the pantry door? That'll keep you out of sight of anyone who might stray in here. Meanwhile, it'll give ya a chance to rest. Besides," she added, "staying in here is probably the safest place for you two. Alric never comes in here."

Once they had secured themselves from sight, the cook brought them an open-faced meat pie with a small bowl of cherries. "I have other news as well," she told them softly. "A blond-haired man with a gray cloak was through here two days ago, asking for a couple of young folks." She nodded to Jayel. "He described you perfectly."

Imoen looked at the cook strangely. "Who was it? Surely there's not someone else after us as well."

Jayel turned to his sister. "It must be the Finder. The mayor said one would be coming." Jayel could feel that they were almost free, and he struggled to not stand in excitement. "What about Alric, has he heard of the stranger?"

"I'm sure he has heard something by now. That must be why he's trying to get others to help."

"What others?" Jayel asked.

"Alric is claiming to be searching for an escaped convict, a young man that escaped from a jail up Havenrook way, and is traveling with a young woman." She nodded at the brother and sister. "Describes the two of you pretty well. Even offered a reward, and he's had a few folks interested."

"But he's talking about us," Jayel said. "Don't they know that Alric deals with slaves? Surely they can't believe that he is really looking for a fugitive."

"Oh they know he's really looking for escaped slaves alright, but Alric pays in gold like I told ya before. That's rare enough in these parts, and most folks around here figure the slaves ain't no one they know, so they don't really care a whole lot."

"Great," said Jayel, throwing up his hands in disgust. "It sounds like we're going to be working against half the town."

"Not once it's dark you won't," said the cook, folding the bread dough into small loaves to rise once more. "An hour or so after sunset most everyone will either be heading home or here. Once folks have gotten settled a bit, the two of you slip on out and head on your way again. With a little luck you can be home shortly. Besides," she added, "I doubt Alric is going to chase after you far with a fyündular around."

No one noticed two furtive shadows slipping out of the back of the inn and toward the forest a few hours later. In moments they had rounded the last house and were into the woods, climbing up the steep mountainside away from the town. They had traveled in the dark for over an hour, when Jayel told his sister they should stop. "Let's find a place to hole up. I can't see a thing and I don't like the idea of moving around out here at night." The thought of there being other things besides Alric he was wary of lay unspoken on his lips.

As the moon rose, they found a hill with an ancient stone oak tree on the crown. They laid their blankets beneath the branches as Imoen prepared to go to sleep. Jayel determined that he would stay awake as long as he could, and as soon as it was light they would leave once more. "One more day," he told his sister. "One more day and then we'll be home."

"Home," Imoen said softly. "I never thought I'd ever see home again."

Jayel sat there for a long time, looking out into the black forest and listening to the slow, easy breaths of his sister sleeping. For the first time since Imoen had been taken, he felt that everything was going to be all right. He would wake Imoen up before the dawn and they would start traveling hard. If they awoke early enough, they would have no problem staying ahead of Alric the whole way. He felt like they were going to make it, like they were almost there.

He was wrong. It was the strange sniffing noise that woke him. In the bright moonlight he could see something moving in the distance at the base of the hill. While still lying on the ground, he slowly hooked the string to his bow. Keeping his eyes on the movement, he reached around and felt for the fletching that marked one of the yew arrows. He drew it out stealthily, all the while never looking away.

After a moment he saw the shape more clearly as it came into a clearing. Alric, the man, stood, searching the ground by the light of the moon, and pausing periodically to sniff the air. Slowly he began to move toward the hill where Imoen and Jayel were, barely making a sound.

As he came close, Alric disappeared behind a tree for a moment, and when he reappeared he had become the beast. Jayel cursed himself for not thinking of this. Alric might not be a very good tracker, but he certainly seemed to be more than able to find their scent.

"Imoen!" Jayel whispered. "Get up!"

"Wha…" she began.

"Shh. Alric is out there, and he's coming this way. I want you to start climbing up the tree."

Looking back into the darkness, Jayel could make out the shadowy form through the woods. The beast paused at the base of the hill and seemed to be looking up to where he and Imoen were hiding. He hoped his sister was not moving the branches so much that Alric could see them.

Slowly, Jayel stood and steadied himself against the edge of the tree, nocking the arrow as he watched the beast creeping towards them. After every few steps, the beast would pause and sniff the air some more. He must sense that they were close by. Jayel watched the beast carefully, trying to time when the beast would pause next. His movements were careful, but there was a pattern to them. At thirty paces the brush had thinned out considerably, and Jayel had a clear shot. Only a few small saplings and some small buckbrush were in the way. It was now or never.

Timing the steps once more, Jayel waited for the pause and then loosed the arrow. The arrow flew straight and struck Alric firmly in the shoulder. The beast yelped with shock and pain, and fell quickly to the ground where he disappeared into the brush.

Jayel peered into the darkness to see if he could tell where Alric had fallen. The blackberry bush was moving slightly. Taking another arrow in his hand, he aimed and fired where the movement was greatest. The arrow flew straight into the bush, but if he had hit Alric, the man hadn't moved. Reaching into his quiver he pulled out another arrow. Three left.

"Jayel, what's happening? Can you see where he went?"

"Shhh," he hissed at her. "I'm trying to listen." He peered back out into the night, searching for any movement and nocked the arrow into his string. His stomach had turned sour and he felt like he had been swallowing rocks all day. Searching into the night, he could see no sign of Alric. He started counting each breath, trying to determine how long it had been since the beast had first been hit. When he reached five hundred, he made up his mind.

"Imoen, climb up higher."

"What? Why?"

"I can't tell where he went. Let's climb the tree and we'll stay there until the sun is out."

He looked up and saw her beginning her ascent once more when he heard movement to the right. Whirling around, he saw the beast rise up and move toward them in the darkness, not more than twenty paces away. Draw, aim, release! The arrow had barely left his bow when he saw it would miss. Alric had seen him aiming and dove down at the last moment.

Jayel's hands were shaking as he reached for the fourth arrow and put it to the string. One left after this. He stared at the area the beast had fallen, half drawing his bow to fire quickly if he needed to. Again he waited, but his patience had worn thin and he started to move forward. Slowly, carefully, he walked to where he had last seen Alric when he saw a flash of movement to his right. Whirling, he saw Alric and released the string. The arrow flew straight and true, striking the beast in the stomach, and he fell without a groan only a few feet away.

Jayel stared at the lifeless body, relief flooding him. He had done it. His arrows had

penetrated the magic and killed the beast. He looked up into the tree and called out to his sister. "Imoen," he shouted, "We're free…" It was her scream that caused him to pause, but he turned too late.

In a whirlwind of fury Alric knocked him face first to the ground, his claws digging deeply into Jayel's sides. Jayel screamed in pain as he struggled to turn over, and jabbed his elbow up, striking a mail shirt that the beast was wearing under a ragged cloak. He had armor! His last shot likely had not even broken the skin.

Jayel twisted under the beast's grip, and turned on his back while the beast hit him again and again with his fist and claws. He tried to hold his hands up to protect himself, but they were continually knocked away by the flurry of blows. Each time he was struck he felt his consciousness starting to fade. He was faintly aware of Imoen crying in the background, but his mind seemed to be in a fog.

He couldn't take much more of this. In desperation he reached down to the quiver at his waist and felt the final yew arrow there. He pulled it out with one hand, while futilely trying to shield the blows with the other. Gripping it tightly in his fist, he swung the arrow up with all his might, and somehow found soft flesh. The arrow had plunged into Alric's armpit. The beast roared with pain, and started to pull back. In Jayel's battered consciousness, he knew that he needed to force the arrow deeper into the wound, and he continued to push even harder with both hands, ignoring the blows that still struck him as Alric desperately tried to get away.

The roars increased in intensity, and Jayel began to hear a faint bubbly quality to them. Alric finally pulled himself away from Jayel, and struggled to stand. The beast walked for a few steps, and then collapsed. "Imoen," Jayel called. Then everything went black.

He stood in his garden, walking carefully amongst the seedlings. Ash, aspen, red maple, white oak; he needed to transplant them to the stands in the forest soon. Taking a deep breath, he relished the smells of the forest that greeted his nose, almost able to taste the scents that were there. In his best clothes, he looked out of place in his garden. His silk shirt would not stand up to the rigors of a hard day's work. Today, he looked the prosperous businessman that he was. He sighed, and ran his hands over his shaved head. It was time to be getting back.

The stones under his feet crunched with each step as he walked up the path to his home. He had prospered in the seven years since his parents had died. His father had planted trees with the future in mind, and Jayel had been able to reap the benefits of his father's careful planning. The old cottage was still there, but the old seasoning shed and workshop had been replaced by a much larger building, where Jayel stayed busy despite several apprentices. They were all away however, readying themselves for tonight. For the moment, it was just Imoen and himself. He would have to hurry. Soon some of Imoen's friends would be arriving.

She sat on a bench outside the house, arranging some wildflowers into a bouquet. He could faintly hear her voice singing her favorite song. "It may not be in the valley, but it matters not when I'll see you again."

He walked up to her and gave her a big smile. "Mother would have been very proud of you," he said. "You've grown into a beautiful woman."

"Why thank you Jayel," she said grinning back. "I've been wondering where you had gone. I would have thought that you would have been here to give me lots of brotherly advice."

"I do have something that I wanted to give you before this day really begins, but it's

not advice. It's going to be so busy later on that I probably won't really have a chance. On your wedding day, I wanted to give you your first gift." He motioned his sister to follow him into his workshop to where a large package wrapped in brown paper lay on a table.

"What is it?" she asked, her eyes bright with curiosity. Jayel watched her small hands untie the knots holding the wrapping in place. She gasped in amazement when the paper was finally removed and she saw the gift, a fine cupboard with intricate carvings of the wild flowers that Imoen loved.

"It's made from the old stone oak of father's," he told her.

"Oh Jayel, it's beautiful."

"Open it up," he said, turning the cupboard so she could swing the doors open wide. Tears came to her eyes when she saw what it held, and wordlessly she turned and held her brother tightly in her arms.

Inside were a single, silver candlestick and a silver tipped arrow made from yew. "I found it in the brush afterwards," he told her. "That is your arrow."

The End

Robert Shell decided to get off his duff and start writing after reading Heinlein's Rule by Robert J. Sawyer in Deep Magic. He is a graduate of Brigham Young University and lives in Idaho with four very active children and his beautiful wife, without whom any writing would be impossible.

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